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Post-Revolutionary Theatre in Virginia 1784-1810

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PROP ROOM OF QUINCY'S ACADEMY THEATRE IN 1796
FROM A WATERCOLOR BY BENJAMIN HENRY LATROBE

POST-REVOLUTIONARY THEATRE

IN VIRGINIA

1784 - 1810

A Thesis

Submitted to

the Faculty of the College of William and Mary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the Department of History

by

Susanne Ketchum Sherman

February 1950

To Dr. Richard L. Morton
whose ready interest and encouragement
have been invaluable.

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INTRODUCTION

In a country where democracy dictates that an ear be kept for the will of the people, "the people" assume an importance by reason of which they merit study. Such study is, however, difficult; for seldom do they react as a unit to make their collective will known. They may best be studied when there is a unity of time and place within which they may act, a focal point to narrow down and concentrate their reactions, and a gathering place to make them stimulatingly aware that they are sharing their experience with one another. These conditions, present in popular elections, are also fulfilled in the playhouse; for theatre, by the very nature of its presentation, is a social art.

In a community where there is no organized opposition to theatrical presentations, a representative group of people gathers in the playhouse. Packed closely together, keenly aware of the group of which they are a part, their attention is focussed, in time and space, upon the stage. The individual, through empathy, enters into the protagonist of the drama and assimilates the stage experience of the actor. While he thus broadens his horizon he is pleasantly aware that his experience is shared. It is this concentration of interest and the feeling of shared experience that are the amalgamating forces which melt down an oddly assorted group of spectators into an audience.

In the anonymity of its composite parts, and in the personality of the whole, an audience closely approximates "the people," and an

audience can be studied and evaluated. A good actor senses the most minute reaction of the composite friend or foe before him and subtly varies his performance in accordance with it. He tests the temper of the public, not by Mr. Gallup's scientific sampling of the parts, but by his personal, seismographic, recording of each emotional tremor of the whole. His future brightens when an audience applauds, and darkens when it is dead, hostile, or merely inattentive. It is thus probable that any actor, who has spent a lifetime on the stage, has learned to register the will of the audience and evaluate it.

Much, then, can be learned about the people of Virginia in the first years of the Republic by a study of their amusements. What did these people find entertaining, instructive, offensive, or objectionable. What demands did they make concerning segregation of classes or races within the playhouses? Which plays, encouraged, were repeated, and which were banned by censorship or literary criticism, or simply lack of applause or subsequent empty houses? Which actors pleased the people, and what was the secret of their pleasing? How was the theatre to reach the people who were so widely scattered in an agricultural state?

These are the questions which this study seeks to answer. Source material for the study has been difficult to locate. Social histories are based upon material gathered in the northern cities, and mention of the South is made casually as if in deference to the outlying districts. Theatre histories follow the same pattern. Nowhere

is there any mention of the fact that, while theatrical performances were against the law in Philadelphia, banned in Boston, and grudgingly tolerated in New York, they were welcomed in Baltimore, Richmond, Petersburg, Norfolk, Charleston, and Savannah and probably many of the smaller towns of the South. Sparcely populated as they undoubtedly were, five Virginia towns had built theatres by popular subscription before the end of the eighteenth century.¹

That the southern theatres have been so neglected, is largely due to the fact that there are so few newspapers, broadsides, or playbills available for the student. The newspaper accounts, which form the backbone of this study, were gathered from eleven different libraries; there are never-the-less, obvious omissions which could only have been filled by visits to the libraries of Harvard, Yale, the University of Wisconsin, the Huntington Library, and the American Antiquarian Society.² However, from the limited amount of material covered, a picture begins to emerge of an audience made up of a cross section of the population, partially segregated within the playhouses, whose appreciation of the best in drama, or whose love of dance, music, and color, is reflected in the plays they encouraged. There emerges,

¹ Richmond, Norfolk, Petersburg, Fredericksburg, and Alexandria.

² Microfilm of all known issues of early newspapers from Virginia can be obtained from these institutions, but the cost of securing such copies would prove prohibitive. Without a perusal of these papers, it cannot be ascertained which issues would contain material of value to the subject.

also, the stirring story of two couples of players who, coming from England to a new land, established a theatrical company which was to endure for twenty-two years, outliving all four of them.

This then is a step toward the telling of an untold story -- the story of a people who, unhampered by the religious restrictions of the Calvinists and Quakers, and aided by a long history and tradition of good theatre, welcomed the companies of comedians, supported their productions, subscribed to shares in their theatres, occasionally acted with them and wrote plays for them, and, in their newspapers, followed them when they played out of town. This study is a contribution toward the groundwork that must be done before the history of the theatre in the South can be written,³ before a true picture of the American theatre can emerge.

³ The various theatres of the South appear to be inextricably bound together. Dennis Ryan, Godwin and McGrath, West and Eignall, Placide, Green and Twitte, Young, and Caldwell -- all played in more than one state in the South between 1784 and 1820. Caldwell, the last in point of time, played in Charleston, South Carolina; Petersburg, Virginia; and New Orleans. To date, there are two excellent books on the Charleston Theatre and an interesting and valuable article on the Petersburg Theatre. The early French theatre in New Orleans has been touched upon, and the Richmond theatre has been studied for the period of 1818-38.

CHAPTER I

Virginia's Contribution to the Theatre:

An Audience

First Post-Revolutionary Theatre in Virginia:

Dennis Ryan and his Company of Comedians

The Death of Dennis Ryan

CHAPTER I

In Virginia, "Plays and Romances" were "more read than the History of the Blessed Jesus,"¹ and playhouses were more popular than churches.² Whatever the accuracy of this statement of Reverend Samuel Davies, Virginia, from early in her history, could boast that priceless and irreplaceable ingredient of good theatre, an audience. Such an audience, like a lodestone, drew actors to it and aided them materially in providing the playhouses necessary for their art. The history of the theatre in Virginia is thus abundant, varied and long. A record of it dates back as early as 1655 when The Bear and The Cub was presented in Accomac County. A charge was lodged against the actors of this piece, but the court adjudged the play harmless, and the complainant was forced to pay the costs.³ By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Virginia audience was making its presence felt.

¹ This statement is found in a sermon delivered by the Reverend Samuel Davies in 1755: "Religion and Patriotism, the Constitution of a Good Soldier," quoted in Paul Leicester Ford, Washington and the Theatre (New York, 1899), 2.

² Several visitors to Virginia in the eighteenth century commented on the popularity of the playhouse and the scarcity of churches in Richmond, Petersburg, and Norfolk. Remarks concerning the Norfolk playhouse and churches may be found in Anne Pitson, A Poetical Picture of America (London, 1809), 133-50. Noah Webster, visiting Petersburg in 1785, noted that the church, as in Richmond, was built at a distance from the town; that it seemed to be the taste of Virginians to locate their churches as far as possible from town and their playhouses in the center of it: Edward A. Wyatt, IV, "Three Petersburg Theatres," William and Mary Quarterly, 2d ser., XVI (1941), 87.

³ Virginia, American Guide Series (New York, 1940), 137.

Early in the next century, 1718, the first theatre built in the British continental colonies was erected in Williamsburg, Virginia;⁴ and in 1752, Lewis Hallam, Senior and his company, the first professional company of comedians arriving from England, landed at Yorktown. From there, they proceeded to Williamsburg where, on the fifth of September, they opened their theatre with The Merchant of Venice and the farce The Anatomist.⁵ Long before the Revolution, the residents of Norfolk, Tappahannock, Petersburg, Fredericksburg, and Williamsburg enjoyed the opportunity of watching their favorite plays enacted upon the stage.⁶

The keen and widespread interest in the theatre evinced by Virginians is evident not only from the playbills and newspaper records of the professional theatre performances, but also from the number of amateurs who played for their own amusement,⁷ the lists of plays

⁴ Robert H. Land, "The First Williamsburg Theatre," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., V (1948), 359-60.

⁵ Virginia Gazette, (Williamsburg, Virginia), September 25, 1751.

⁶ "The Theatre in Eighteenth Century Virginia outside of Williamsburg," Virginia Magazine, XXXV (1927), 289.

⁷ It was not uncommon in the eighteenth century to find professional casts augmented by parts played by "young gentlemen for their amusement." There were also groups which were wholly amateur, acting plays for their own entertainment as well as that of their friends who made up the audience. One of the earliest records of such a performance comes to us from the "diary of John Blair," which was written in an Almanac for 1751 (preserved in the Virginia Historical Society) and reprinted in the William and Mary Quarterly, 1st ser., VIII (1899), 15. This diary mentions a rehearsal of Cato in the dormitory of the College of William and Mary.

available at the bookstores and lending libraries,⁸ the amount of dramatic literature found in the private libraries of such well known people as "Councillor" Carter,⁹ Colonel William Byrd II,¹⁰ and John Parke Custis,¹¹ from place names such as "Beggar's Bush,"¹² and the names of ships and horses such as Yorick, Hamlet, Desdemona, Belvidera, and Nolla. Certainly the horse "Norval, got by Shark, his dam by Shakespeare out of Lady Northumberland"¹³ bears the brand of a theatre lover.

With the coming of the Revolution, however, theatre in Virginia, as in all the other colonies, suffered an eclipse. In October, 1774, the Continental Congress, lacking the power to prohibit theatrical performances within the states, recommended that the states themselves should pass laws "to prevent theatrical entertainments, horse-racing, and such other diversions as are productive of idle-

⁸ Manuscript list of book sales, probably from William Hunter's bookstore in Williamsburg, 1753-55, included in Virginia Miscellany, 1606-1772, in the Library of Congress.

⁹ Philip Vickers Fithian, Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian (Williamsburg, 1943), 285.

¹⁰ Wyatt, "Three Petersburg Theatres," 83.

¹¹ Charles Arthur Hoppins, "The Library of John Parke Custis, Esquire," Tyler's Historical Quarterly, IX (1927), 97-103.

¹² Wyatt, in his article, "Three Petersburg Theatres," calls attention to the fact that the present Jordan's Point was once known as "Beggar's Bush," which would seem to indicate a familiarity with Fletcher's play.

¹³ The Virginia Herald (Fredericksburg), March 14, 1798.

ness."¹⁴ Four days later, the Congress made a second attempt to force the abandonment of "expensive diversions and entertainments"¹⁵ by asserting that the "frequenting of playhouses and theatrical entertainments has a fatal tendency to divert the minds of the people from a due attention to the means necessary for the defense of the country and the preservation of their liberties"¹⁶ and any person in the Continental service "who shall act, promote, encourage, or attend such plays, shall be deemed unworthy to hold such office and shall be accordingly dismissed."¹⁷ These rulings, together with the natural exigencies of war, brought about the hiatus between the colonial and the post-revolutionary theatre in America. For ten years,¹⁸ then, Virginians concentrated their energies upon the war and the prodigious task of reconstruction which of necessity followed the burning of Norfolk,¹⁹ the sacking of the newly established capital

¹⁴ George O. Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre During the Revolution and After (Philadelphia, 1869), II, 51.

¹⁵ Arthur Hornblow, A History of the Theatre in America (Philadelphia, 1919), I, 147.

¹⁶ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 51.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The rulings of the Continental Congress put an end to entertainment in Virginia in 1774 (exception noted). The first theatrical production in Virginia after the war was in Richmond in 1784.

¹⁹ Norfolk was bombarded by British ships in the harbor on January 1, 1776; and later on the same day, men from these ships rowed ashore and set fire to the wharves and the buildings nearest the shore. American soldiers also set fire to the buildings in Norfolk on the same

at Richmond,²⁰ and the destruction caused by the battles that culminated in Yorktown. The only dramatic performances on record for these years are those given by the British officers stationed at Staunton and Charlottesville in Virginia.²¹

After the war, as early as 1782, Southern audiences welcomed the theatre back wholeheartedly. This was three years before it was grudgingly tolerated²² in Philadelphia and New York. The fighting had hardly ceased and the peace treaties had not been signed²³ when the first post-war playhouse was opened in Baltimore on January 16, 1782.²⁴

day, each army seeking to make the city untenable for the other. By the third of January, nearly 900 buildings had been destroyed. Then, early in February, 1776, by order of the Virginia Convention, the rest of the town was burned. Thomas J. Wertenbaker, Norfolk, Historic Southern Port (Durham, N. C., 1927), 67-69.

²⁰ Richmond was pillaged and plundered on January 5, 1781 by nine hundred British soldiers under the leadership of Benedict Arnold. W. Asbury Christian, Richmond, Her Past and Present (Richmond, 1912), 20-21.

²¹ British soldiers presented plays in Staunton and Charlottesville. George C. D. Odell, Annals of the New York Stage (New York, 1927), I, 195; Thomas Anburey, Travels through the Interior Parts of America (Boston, 1925), II, 266.

²² Lewis Hallam was unable to obtain a license to play in Philadelphia when he returned there in 1784, resorted to borderline performances, advertised as "A Lecture on Heads," or "Strictures upon the most eminent Dramatic Authors . . . diversified with Music, Scenery, and other Decorations." The actors went to New York in August, 1785. Here they were compelled to resort to the same subterfuges. Thomas Clark Pollock, The Philadelphia Theatre in the Eighteenth Century (Philadelphia, 1933), 41-43; Odell, Annals, I, 232-34.

²³ Treaty of Paris, September 3, 1783.

²⁴ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 54.

It was Thomas Llewellyn Lechmere Wall²⁵ who built, with the aid of Adam Lindsay, a tavern keeper at Fell's Point,²⁶ this playhouse; and it was he who raised its first curtain on a production of Richard III. In this production he himself played the part of Richard, his wife played Queen Elizabeth, and his daughter, the Duke of York.²⁷ The season had not progressed far before Mr. and Mrs. Ryan made their appearance. Their first performance on record was in Douglass, in which they played the parts of Morval and Lady Randolph.²⁸ Who this couple were or where they had come from, is open to conjecture, but from their first appearance, they assumed a position of leadership in the company; and, on June 9, 1793, Dennis Ryan formally took over the management of the Baltimore Company from Lindsay and Wall.²⁹ The transaction seems to have been a friendly one; for, although Lindsay retired, Wall remained with the company and continued to play under Ryan. Seilhamer suggests that Wall may have been very well satisfied

²⁵ Full names are difficult to find in this period when theatre programs listed actors as "Mr. ____" only. There are several references; however, to Thomas Wall. He is listed as "Dr. Llewellyn Lechmere Wall" (a name which seems fanciful) in a playbill (Newbern, N. C., May 16, 1797) owned by Colonial Williamsburg, Inc.; and he is referred to in the Encyclopedia Americana (Chicago, 1944), XXVI, 495, by all four names and is noted there particularly as having made a collection of playbills which cover forty years of the life of an actor.

²⁶ Encyclopedia Americana, XXVI, 495.

²⁷ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 54.

²⁸ Ibid., 70-71.

²⁹ Ibid., 59.

with the arrangement because he profited financially. A further explanation for his willingness to step down may have been his advancing age;³⁰ for the life of an actor-manager was strenuous and exacting and required a tremendous amount of energy.

This energy, vitality, and resourcefulness, the Ryans possessed to a marked degree. Dennis Ryan set out immediately to increase his audiences. The size of Baltimore in 1783 precluded any great increase in that city, but there was always the possibility of moving the company to another location. In June, therefore, he took them to New York, where they played until August sixteenth.³¹ That this season was successful was no doubt due to the fact that, although the war was over, British troops were still quartered in the city. The idle officers must have found a welcome diversion in the theatre. Ryan and his company of comedians left New York a month before the British

³⁰ Without a record of his birth, it is not possible to do more than make a broad guess at Mr. Wall's age. We know only that the earliest mention we have of him is in the South Carolina Gazette, December 17, 1765, which is quoted in Sola Willis, The Charleston Stage in the XVIII Century (Columbia, S. C., 1924), 60. This, together with all the subsequent notices of his acting throughout the colonies, shows that he has been playing outside of England for nearly 20 years; and since he advertises himself as being from "the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane and the Haymarket, London," we can be fairly sure that he was an actor of some experience before he ventured abroad. We would guess, then, that he was in his middle forties. Although he lived and acted for many years after this, it is a fair guess that in 1783, he was beginning to feel his age after eighteen months of acting leading roles, planning, casting, directing and rehearsing new plays, and handling all the other problems which faced the actor-manager of his day.

³¹ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 96-97.

departed;³² and, in the hope that he could play next in Philadelphia, he sent a petition there, asking that the law against plays be repealed; but the assembly tabled his appeal and took no further action on the matter.³³

The company returned to Baltimore, opening a season on December 2, 1783, which lasted until February 14, 1784. In closing, they announced that they were going next to Annapolis for three weeks to play during the races.³⁴

Ryan, who had an eye for greener fields, had written to Benjamin Harrison, governor of Virginia, asking for permission to bring his company into that state. Governor Harrison's answer written on March 13, 1784, was surprisingly encouraging:

The permission you request of introducing into this state your company of comedians is most readily granted so far as it rests with me. I am sensible that these kinds of entertainments are objected to by some very good men as tending to corrupt the morals of the people. Their arguments, however, lose their weight with me, being fixed in the opinion that a well chosen and well acted play is amongst the first of moral lessons and tend greatly to inculcate and fix on the mind the most virtuous principles.³⁵

³² Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 36-37.

³³ Thomas Clark Pollock, The Philadelphia Theatre in the Eighteenth Century (Philadelphia, 1933), 134.

³⁴ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 106.

³⁵ Governor Benjamin Harrison to Mr. Ryan, March 13, 1784, Executive Letter Book, No. 3, 296, Virginia State Library. The last portion of this letter may be found in Tyler's Quarterly Magazine, III (1920), 219.

Thus encouraged, Ryan made plans to take his company south. From the scanty evidence we have, it would seem that he first made the trip alone, leaving Annapolis sometime after the middle of March and returning to Baltimore after the first of May.³⁶ In Richmond, it would appear that he talked with Governor Harrison, discussing with him his plans for traveling still further south as far as Charleston and perhaps, Savannah. Since there were no mail coaches at that time,³⁷ Governor Harrison gave him a message which he wished to have delivered to the governor of Georgia. While he was in Richmond, Ryan must also have looked about in search of a suitable place in which to play and have arranged to have the necessary alterations made in the building he selected.³⁸ We know that he reached Charleston and that at least a part of the trip there from Richmond, he made on horseback. It would be interesting to know if he stopped in Petersburg where there was a theatre which had survived the Revolution³⁹ and

³⁶ The itinerary compounded from all the available material on Dennis Ryan (see Appendix I.) shows the gap in which it is reasonable to believe this trip took place.

³⁷ Hugh Blair Grigsby, The History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788 (Richmond, 1890), I, 27.

³⁸ Dennis Ryan's "New Theatre" which later became known as the "Old Theatre," was situated on Main Street near the Market House. Christian, Richmond, 27. This could hardly have been a new building; for there would not have been time between this visit and the first performance given in the new theatre for it to have been erected. It was, in all probability, a warehouse or barn hurriedly adapted to the use of the comedians.

³⁹ "The Old Play House" is listed in an appraisal of the buildings of Petersburg in 1784-1785, cited in Wyatt, "Three Petersburg Theatres."

where he should have found a receptive audience.⁴⁰ We do know that on May 1, 1784, on his return trip, he stopped in Fredericksburg; for he wrote from there to Governor Harrison:

Fredericksburg, May 1st.⁴¹

Sir,

It is with unfeigned sorrow I am under the necessity of informing Your Excellency that those dispatches you were pleased to honor me with for the Governor of Georgia have miscarried.

My servant upon the road robbed me of a horse, my portmanteau, and every letter and paper I possessed, among which these were contained.

From Charles Town I took the liberty of writing a line to the Governor of Georgia, informing him I was entrusted with letters from Your Excellency and of my misfortune.

I thought it necessary to forward this advice to Your Excellency, not knowing what consequence they might be of.

I am Your Excellency's most devoted,

Dennis Ryan.⁴²

It is interesting to place him thus in Fredericksburg and to wonder if he found in this city a suitable location for a theatre. In some ways, it would seem to have been a more satisfactory place than Richmond. It was described by a traveler in 1784 as "a considerable town of trade, furnishing the country round."⁴³ This thriving trade could be expected

⁴⁰ Although the only records of performances of Ryan's comedians in 1784 are for Baltimore, Charleston, and Richmond, it seems probable from their itinerary (see Appendix I) that they played in other southern towns as well. The fact that he may have been looking for additional places to perform, seems the only sensible reason for his having made the trip from Richmond to Charleston on horseback.

⁴¹ Although the year is not given, it becomes evident from studying the itinerary (Appendix I) that the year is 1784.

⁴² Dennis Ryan to Benjamin Harrison, May 1st, Benjamin Harrison papers, Virginia State Library.

⁴³ Joseph Hadfield, An Englishman in America, Douglas S. Robertson, ed. (Toronto, 1933), 11.

to draw people to town from the surrounding countryside and to put money in the pockets of the prospective audience. Another advantage of Fredericksburg as a location for the players was the existence of a theatre and the tradition of theatrical performances.⁴⁴ Then, too, there was the "Harmonic Society," which had given a concert in January⁴⁵ and might be counted upon to furnish enthusiastic and discriminating members of the audience and perhaps some "gentlemen for their amusement" to assist in the orchestra.

Whether or not he ever did play in Fredericksburg, is open to conjecture; but in Richmond on June 3, 1784, he and his company of comedians were granted "permission to perform public exhibitions on the stage under such restraints as Common Hall shall deem expedient."⁴⁶ This company included the Mr. Wall, who had been a manager of the first post-revolutionary theatre in the United States, his wife, who had played leading roles in that theatre, and his daughter, who although still very young,⁴⁷ was proving herself an asset in a company which

⁴⁴ Robert Hunt Land, "Theatre in Colonial Times" (Master's Thesis, University of Virginia, 1936).

⁴⁵ Huger Wilkinson Jervey, "The South's Contribution to Music," in John Bell Kenneman, ed., History of the Literary and Intellectual Life of the South, Vol. VII of The South in the Building of the Nation (Richmond, 1909), 379.

⁴⁶ City of Richmond Records, June 3, 1784, Virginia State Library (microfilm).

⁴⁷ Since her debut in 1782, she had played such parts as Fleance in Macbeth, the Duke of York in Richard III, the Page in Romeo and Juliet, and the Maid in School for Scandal. Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 118.

was called upon for so many operas, musical entertainments and entr'acte songs. In the few surviving programs, Miss Wall is particularly noted as a singer. There were also Mr. Lewis, who played "pleasant, light characters,"⁴⁸ and his wife; Mr. and Mrs. Smith;⁴⁹ Mrs. Hyde, a singer who had joined the company in New York where she had previously assisted the British officers in their performances;⁵⁰ and Mr. Godwin, who had played in the colonies as early as 1768.⁵¹ There were also, of course, the Ryans. The list of parts which Mr. Ryan played⁵² shows versatility and a preference for the young heroes. Mrs. Ryan, on the other hand, played aunts, mothers, chamber-maids, and queens, and we therefore picture her as more rotund than her husband.

The company was undoubtedly larger than these few names would seem to indicate, although the scanty records extant fail to disclose it. There were, in all probability, a carpenter, responsible for the "scenes and machines" and a business manager or box-keeper whose work

⁴⁸ Evening Post (Charleston), July 11, 1786, quoted in Willis, The Charleston Stage, 108-09.

⁴⁹ It would seem that Mr. and Mrs. Smith were not necessarily related; Mr. Smith having been with Lindsay and Wall during their first season in Baltimore, and Mrs. Smith, whom Odell mentions as being one of the "military ladies" who assisted the British officers, having joined the company in 1783.

⁵⁰ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 63, 97; Odell, Annals of the New York Stage, I, 220.

⁵¹ O. G. Sonneck, Early Opera in America (New York, 1915), 44.

⁵² He played Douglas, Hamlet, Cato, and Oroonoko in plays of those names; George in George Barnwell, Falstaff in King Henry IV, Macduff in Macbeth, Iago in Othello, and Pilch in Beggar's Opera.

was complicated by the lack of a unified national monetary system⁵³ and the scarcity of small change;⁵⁴ and either or both of these men would have been called upon, when it seemed necessary, to swell the crowds or lengthen the processions on stage. The crowds and processions were no doubt also augmented by the actor's families. The Ryans had two small children⁵⁵ who must have proved invaluable; and although there seems to have been no Mr. Hyde, there was a Mrs. Bodwin, who had made her debut on the stage in Jamaica with the American Company.⁵⁶ There must also have been an orchestra leader, if not the orchestra itself, attached to the company; for the programs advertised in the papers include at least one opera, which could not have been performed without an orchestra to play the overture and accompaniments. Since these accompaniments were not generally written out but were supplied from the figured bass by the official composer or arranger of the company to fit the local

⁵³ The infant Republic had not yet established the first United States Bank (1791-1811) or minted any coins. English coins were still the most common medium of exchange although French and Spanish money was also widely used.

⁵⁴ A traveler in Virginia in 1788 recalls the practice which produced the coins which came to be known as sharp shanks. The scarcity of small money, he says, "has given rise to a pernicious practice of cutting pieces of silver into halves and quarters, a source of many little knaveries. A person cuts a dollar into three pieces, keeps the middle and passes the other two for half dollars." Jean Pierre Brissot De Warville, New Travels in the United States of America (New York, 1792), 239.

⁵⁵ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 114.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 202.

conditions,⁵⁷ and since Dibdin's The Padlock was given soon after the arrival of the company in Richmond, it would seem evident that an arranger was attached to that company.

Unless Ryan had taken pains to prepare the company for what they would find when they reached Richmond in 1784, this capitol of Virginia must certainly have been a shock to them. Mr. Godwin, who had been with the pre-war Virginia Company,⁵⁸ and the Walls, who had been in David Douglass' American Company, had played in the Commonwealth before the war when Williamsburg, at that time the capitol, was a thriving town with its Governor's Palace, its College, its large brick Capitol building, and its theatre. To all this, Richmond must have provided a sharp and unpleasant contrast. Although a city by charter, it was in reality a village of some two or three hundred houses, most of them made of wood, painted different colors. The town stretched three quarters of a mile up a hill from the top of which there was a "delightful view of the river, the falls, the country about, and the town of Manchester on the other side of the river."⁵⁹ The streets were open spaces of earth, unpaved and without sidewalks, so muddy in wet weather that wagons sank to the axles and pedestrians to their knees, and so dusty in dry weather that wagons and people sank almost equally

⁵⁷ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 71-72.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁹ Robert Hunter, Jr., Quebec to Carolina, Louis E. Wright and Marion Tinling, editors (San Marino, California, 1943), 236.

deep in the dust. The capitol building was an ugly structure, "a mere wooden barn . . . an unlovely site at the foot of the Hill."⁶⁰ The Market-House was a wooden shed supported by locust posts. Robert Hunter, Jr., traveling through Richmond in 1786, found the governor's house a very poor one and the courthouse "the shabbiest I ever saw."⁶¹ Some idea of what Richmond was like⁶² may be gathered from the Ordinance passed by the Common Hall on July 12, 1784, which sought to prevent "stallions, ridglings, hogs, goats, bears or dogs from going at large within the city."⁶³ But, although the actors may have found them discouraging, in reality the animals going at large in the muddy or dusty streets, the unimposing public buildings, and the total lack of any suitable building in which to perform, were of less importance to the success of their venture than were the residents of the town who were their potential audience; for a receptive and discriminating audience can cause theatre to grow under the most adverse physical handicaps. Richmond seems to have had such an audience.

⁶⁰ Samuel Mordecai, Richmond in By-Gone Days (Richmond, 1886), 40.

⁶¹ Hunter, Quebec to Carolina, 236-237.

⁶² This description of Richmond has been compounded from the following sources: Douglas S. Robertson, ed., Joseph Hadfield, An Englishman in America, 1785 (Toronto, 1933), 8-10; Christian, Richmond, 21-23; Albert J. Beveridge, The Life of John Marshall (Boston, 1919), 171; together with Hunter and Mordecai from whose books the direct quotations were taken.

⁶³ City of Richmond Records, July 12, 1784, microfilm in the Virginia State Library.

This audience included slaves and the governor of the state,⁶⁴ permanent residents such as John Marshall⁶⁵ and Colonel James Monroe,⁶⁶ and transients from the small western plantations or the frontier who had traveled to Richmond for supplies. By far the most important element of the audience was, however, the members of the legislature.⁶⁷ These gentlemen contributed a holiday air of conviviality to the audience. They had seen plays in Virginia or in England before the war; and they knew how much more exciting it was to partake of theatre with their friends than to read dramas alone in their libraries. From the loneliness and isolation of their widely scattered plantations, they came to Richmond in much the same spirit as the modern business man attends his college reunion. During the sitting of the legislature, then, there was in Richmond an audience both eager and gay; and it was this potential audience which had drawn Ryan's American Company from its established playhouse in Baltimore.

If "Dennis Ryan's New Theatre"⁶⁸ was opened with any fanfare, it has been lost to us; for there is nothing about the advertisement in the

⁶⁴ Governor Harrison had shown, as already noted, his interest in the theatre.

⁶⁵ Beveridge, The Life of John Marshall, I, 179.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ The theatrical companies who played in Richmond between 1784 and 1820 invariably planned their seasons of from two to four months, to coincide with the meeting of the legislature.

⁶⁸ Virginia Gazette and Independent Chronicle, June 12, 1784.

Gazette for June twelfth that suggests a first post-revolutionary performance.⁶⁹ The plays announced in that advertisement are the tragedy of Douglass by the Reverend John Home, and Dibdin's opera, The Padlock.⁷⁰ Ryan's company had given at least two performances of Douglass before coming to Virginia,⁷¹ but The Padlock appears to be a new addition to their repertoire.⁷² John Marshall notes in his account book the expenses entailed in going to the theatre on June twenty-second and twenty-sixth and on July third and tenth;⁷³ but of these performances, we know only that he attended them.

On the tenth of July, Ryan applied to the Common Hall for permission to give a Benefit for the city. He was granted permission and a Mr. Boyd was appointed to receive the money and to report on it.⁷⁴ Two days later, however, Mr. Ryan was informed that the Common Hall, although "convinced, from his offer . . . , of his polite attention," could not accept;⁷⁵ and we are left to wonder what could

⁶⁹ The first program we find advertised does not appear to be the first production given in the new theatre. This may perhaps be accounted for by the fact that few copies of late eighteenth century newspapers are available and that there are considerable gaps in files.

⁷⁰ Virginia Gazette and Independant Chronicle, June 12, 1784.

⁷¹ Managers relied primarily upon handbills for advertising. With two performances of Douglass advertised in the newspapers, it is likely that many more were given with only handbills to herald them.

⁷² Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 70-71; 86-87.

⁷³ Beveridge, The Life of John Marshall, I, 179.

⁷⁴ City of Richmond Records, July 10, 1784, microfilm.

⁷⁵ Ibid., July 12, 1784.

have caused them to forego the benefits, the proceeds from which Mr. Boyd had so readily been appointed to collect.

Benefit performances were always given in a block arrangement at the end of the season. This excerpt from the City Records, then, probably meant that Ryan was arranging benefits for his performers before they left Richmond.⁷⁶ It may well be that here belongs the undated half of the program for Mr. Smith's benefit.⁷⁷ This play, an adaptation, by Otway, of Moliere's Fourbriers de Scapin, has a cast of nine, which cannot feasibly be reduced, by cutting or doubling, to less than eight; so we may be sure this is not the complete cast. The play, which Ryan's company had given at least six times before this,⁷⁸ is of particular interest in that it is not sustained by action nor embellished by "scenes and machines" or other eye-catchers. It depends for its success upon good acting — and that chiefly in the part of Scapin. Although the casts for Ryan's productions of The Cheats of Scapin change considerably over a period of time, the part of Scapin was always taken by Thomas Wall, which would seem to go far toward proving him an accomplished actor.

⁷⁶ The leading actors of the company, following the usual eighteenth century practice, were paid a weekly wage and granted, in addition, one benefit performance, the proceeds of which were to be theirs after the deduction of a minimum fee for expenses.

⁷⁷ This program (Plate I) is in the Virginia State Library. The lower half is all that remains, but, the fact that Mr. Smith's name is given as one from whom tickets may be purchased, identifies the program as being his benefit.

⁷⁸ Sailhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 70-71, 86-87.

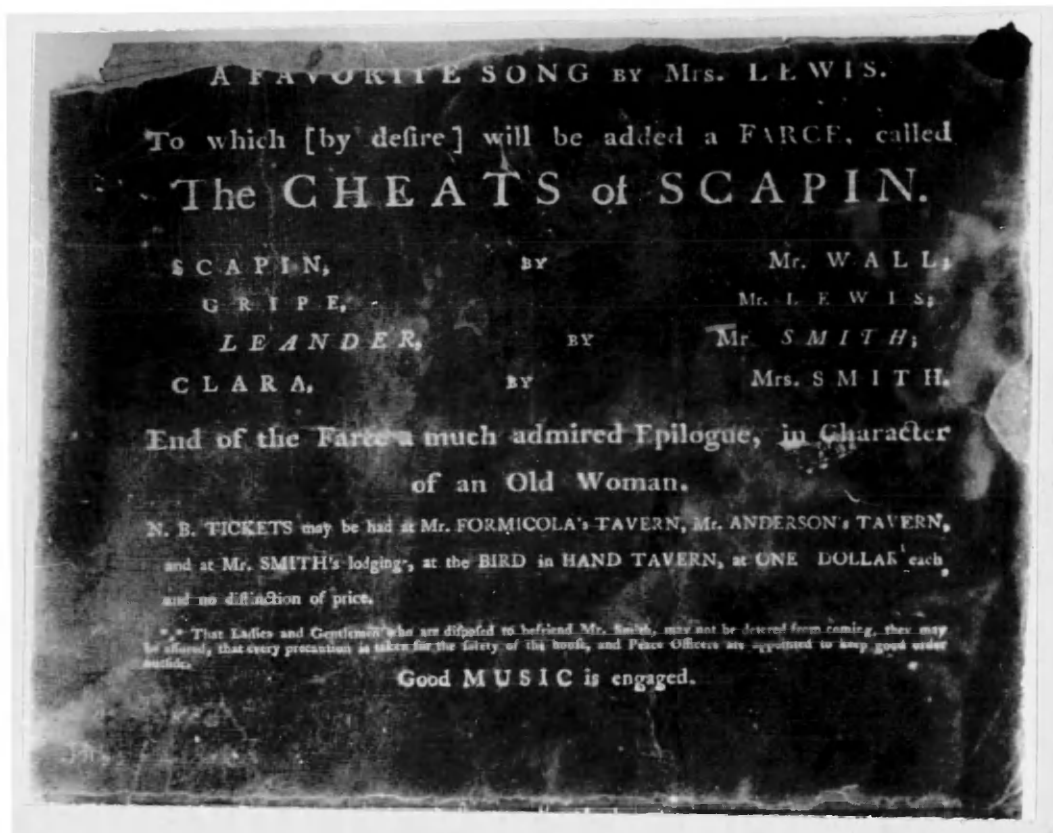


PLATE I

THE LOWER HALF OF A PROGRAM FOR MR. SMITH'S BENEFIT
 IN RICHMOND IN 1784

After the twelfth of July, nothing is known of the travels of the American Company⁷⁹ again until November 27, 1784. On that date, the Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser announced a production of the tragedy The Roman Father, with the part of Horatius played by Mr. Godwin. This performance concluded with "New, Grand, Transparent Scenery, and the entrance of Publius into Rome, accompanied with a grand Procession, and Singing by Mrs. Hyde and Miss Wall."⁸⁰

The scenery would have been the usual eighteenth century arrangement of backdrops and wings, with entrances and exits being made between the wings. "Transparent scenery" was the name given to thin drops painted and heavily coated with varnish.⁸¹ Such drops appeared translucent when lights were placed behind them and were used to achieve special effects on the stage, such as moonlight, a burning building, or a more realistic light in the window of a painted building. They constituted the most expensive type of setting then used. The more usual drops were less expensive and more economical not only because they required less skill and time from the painters and less coatings of varnish, but also because they were used repeatedly. The transparencies on the other hand, were special effects and, as such,

⁷⁹ The American Company was the name used by David Douglass for the company which he managed before the war. Mr. Wall, who was a member of that company was the only link between it and Ryan's company.

⁸⁰ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, November 27, 1784.

⁸¹ "Report of the Committee of Investigation" (of the theatre fire), The Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), December 31, 1811.

were used for one play only. Most of the plays this company produced could have been done quite adequately with but three standard sets of scenery; a foliage wing and border set, an interior, and a street scene. The use of this "transparent scenery," then, would tend to show that the American Company had found an audience which both demanded, and would pay for, something beyond the minimum in theatrical production. The "grand procession" mentioned, although it would appear to be a parade of the actors, may well have been the work of the designer of the scenery and machinery as well. Not infrequently in the eighteenth century, scenery was embellished with little mechanical figures which represented processions wandering through the mountains or a ship sinking and its sailors struggling in the waves before finally being rescued or perishing.⁸²

The program for November twenty-seventh concludes with John O'Keefe's farce, Tony Lumpkin in Town. Tony, "an awkward booby, reared up and spoiled at his mother's apron strings,"⁸³ was no doubt lifted bodily from She Stoops to Conquer with characteristic disregard for any wishes Oliver Goldsmith might have had concerning the matter.

There is only one other program for that season. It is made up of the comedy, Miser, and the farce, A Trip to Scotland, with the

⁸² Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser, December 16, 1791; Herald (Norfolk), February 20, 1800.

⁸³ Oliver Goldsmith, She Stoops to Conquer in the collection Twelve Famous Plays of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century (New York, 1933), 741.

usual songs between the plays by Mrs. Hyde and Miss Wall.⁸⁴ No cast is given. Lovegold, "the Miser" alone is announced as being played by Mr. Godwin. It is interesting to note that this was the part he played in 1788 in Williamsburg.⁸⁵

On December 13, 1784, the Common Hall again took notice of "Mr. Ryan, manager of the theatre" ordering the mayor to notify him that unless he rendered an account of the number of plays he had performed since the last settlement and paid the tax arising from them, his performances would be permanently suspended until such payment was made. They added, that, in the future, settlement must be made weekly.⁸⁶ Since nothing more is heard of Dennis Ryan in Richmond, we are left to wonder if he left town without paying his taxes. If however, he did fail to pay, the City Records fail to show that his permission to play was suspended, and the reputations and the general interest in the actors seem not to have been diminished by it.

Ryan's trail can be picked up next in Charleston, South Carolina where he played, from March 28, 1785 until early May,⁸⁷ to crowded houses. At the end of this season, Mr. Godwin left the company, and he

⁸⁴ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, December 11, 1784.

⁸⁵ Playbill, Williamsburg, June 8, 1788, owned by Colonial Williamsburg, Incorporated.

⁸⁶ City of Richmond Records, December 13, 1784, microfilm.

⁸⁷ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 69; Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 62.

and Mr. Kidd⁸⁸ opened a theatre in Savannah, Georgia, with Mr. and Mrs. Godwin; Mr. and Mrs. Kidd; and Ladies and Gentlemen "for their amusement" forming their casts.⁸⁹ The remainder of Ryan's American Company began their tour to the North, leaving Charleston on May 7, 1785 in the schooner "Play-Actor."⁹⁰

It is late in August before we again hear of the Ryans. They are, at that time, in Bath, Virginia, "near the Valley of the Shenandoah."⁹¹ From Bath, Dennis Ryan wrote a letter, which he published in the August twenty-sixth issue of the Maryland Journal, protesting against the "illiberal" and "scandalous" interpretations placed upon his absence from Baltimore. He promised that the Baltimore theatre, which had cost him two thousand pounds and was now entirely in his possession, would reopen shortly. His long absence, he explained, was due to ill health and his "connections in Virginia."⁹² He was true to his promise to the Marylanders; the Baltimore theatre opened September

⁸⁸ Since Mr. Kidd was a member of Ryan's company during his last season in Baltimore, Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, 112, it is quite likely that he had been with him ever since the 1783-1784 season and only broke away when he and Mr. Godwin decided to start a theatre of their own.

⁸⁹ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 103-104.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 91.

⁹¹ Ferdinand Marie Bayard, A Journey Into the Interior of the United States, to Bath, Winchester, The Shenandoah Valley, etc., etc., During the Summer of 1791, quoted in Travels in Virginia in Revolutionary Times, ed., A. J. Morrison (Lynchburg, Virginia, 1922), 82.

⁹² Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 61.

7, 1786.⁹³

Dennis Ryan died in January, 1786;⁹⁴ but his company continued to play in Baltimore under the management of his widow until June.⁹⁵ While this company was, according to Sonneck, occupied in Baltimore, there must still have been theatrical activity of some sort going on in Richmond. Mrs. Hyde was certainly still in the city; for there are newspaper advertisements concerning her, which date from November twelfth to the twentieth. On the twelfth, there is a notice that the "Richmond Subscription Concert" will be postponed until the sixteenth because of the rainy weather.⁹⁶ This concert, held in the Capitol⁹⁷ was advertised as vocal music by Mrs. Hyde.⁹⁸ A similar advertisement appeared in the November nineteenth newspaper announcing a concert for the twentieth.⁹⁹ There is also an entry concerning the theatre in the City of Richmond Records, but where earlier records mention Dennis

⁹³ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 61.

⁹⁴ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 114.

⁹⁵ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 61; Willis, The Charleston Stage, 108.

⁹⁶ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, November 12, 1786.

⁹⁷ This was the old capitol building. The new one was not started until 1786. Hunter, Quebec to Carolina, 237.

⁹⁸ It was not at all unusual for the actors of a company who were particularly noted for their singing to give a concert of their own during the theatre season. These concerts were usually given in an academy, a masonic hall, or the long room of a tavern.

⁹⁹ Virginia Gazette (Richmond), November 19, 1786.

Ryan's name, this refers only to the "manager of the play-house."¹⁰⁰ One other actress appears to have been in Richmond at this time: Mrs. Remington, whose appearance there in 1787 is announced as being her first in two years.¹⁰¹ Mrs. Remington, a singer of some pretensions, had made her debut as Mrs. Malaprop in the Rivals in New York on the twenty-third of June, 1785. At that time, she was billed as being from the Theatre Royal, Dublin.¹⁰² The season closed in New York on the second of August;¹⁰³ so it would have been well within the limits of possibility for her to have been playing in Richmond in November.

There are three other players whom we might, with good reason, place in Virginia at this time. They are Mr. and Mrs. Walter Davis and Mr. Heard. These three were with Ryan during his last season in Baltimore,¹⁰⁴ and their names are not to be found in the casts of other theatres¹⁰⁵ between this time and the dates when they again appear, on Virginia programs. Of the three, Heard was much the best actor. He

¹⁰⁰ City of Richmond Records, November 14, 1785.

¹⁰¹ Virginia Gazette, December 6, 1787.

¹⁰² Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 181.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 109, 129, 125.

¹⁰⁵ From the published works on the theatres in Charleston, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Providence and Albany.

sustained many long and difficult parts while acting under Ryan, and he has the distinction of having been the first to play Sir Peter Teazle in School for Scandal in this country.¹⁰⁶ He was, in April 1786, the manager of a company then playing in Norfolk.¹⁰⁷ It is possible that it was this company under Mr. Heard which was playing in Petersburg and Richmond in 1784-1786.¹⁰⁸ It is possible -- but from the evidence at hand, it is impossible to prove.

As the year 1785 drew to a close, Dennis Ryan was fighting a losing battle against ill health as he played his last parts in Baltimore. Virginia would miss him. There were actors still remaining in the Commonwealth where they were made to feel more welcome than they had been in the North. There was also, theatre's priceless asset, a good audience -- waiting. What was wanting, more than the playhouses which were soon to be built, was a good manager to bring the two together. This was a part in which Heard was not happily cast. Like Thomas Wall, he tried managing only long enough to find out how strongly the thorny side predominated.

¹⁰⁶ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 108.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 204.

¹⁰⁸ On Tuesday, February 26, 1786, Hunter notes in his diary at Richmond, "The players are at present at Petersburg." Wyatt calls attention also, to city records which show that, in answer to a request from the managers of the theatre, Common Hall provided two constables for the house to prevent disturbances. Allan Nevins, in his book, The American States During and After the Revolution (New York, 1924), 518, mentions references to the theatre in Richmond and Petersburg "in the last two years." The article he quotes appeared on October 5, 1786.

CHAPTER II

Richmond's First Playhouse:

Quesnay's Academy

Hallen and Henry's Season in the New Playhouse

CHAPTER II

In 1786, the Richmond audience, which had been so influential in drawing Ryan and Heard into the south, drew unto themselves still another man who had plans for their entertainment. This enigmatic gentleman was Alexander Quesnay. The first notice we find of him¹ is characteristically ambiguous; for it purports to criticize the study of dancing while soliciting pupils for that very subject:

TO THE PUBLIC

Having engaged myself in the public papers, to remain in this city for one year longer from this time, it may be necessary to give information that I shall entirely quit teaching at the expiration of the time before mentioned.

When I first undertook this business, my intention was to erect an ACADEMY, that might probably prove useful to the community, and consequently honorable to myself. But finding that the general disposition of mind in every place where I have attempted it (at my great expense in both time and money) on this continent, rather inclined to encourage

D A N C I N G

in preference to any of the more useful branches proposed in this ACADEMY, I do not think it proper to run the risk of dishonoring myself in the pursuit of such a business.

All those who shall engage in the DANCING SCHOOL five or six months before the expiration of the time, may be assured to be completed enough so as not to be obliged to go to any other school.

A. M. QUESNAY.²

¹ This advertisement is obviously not the first one which Quesnay put in the Richmond papers. However, many of the early newspapers have been lost, and those known to exist are widely scattered. This then, is the first of Quesnay's advertisements which has been available for this study.

² The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, January 14, 1786. This notice which was repeated several times, is of particular interest in that, while he deploras the exclusive concern of the residents of Richmond with dancing, by the typography of his advertisement, he solicits pupils in this very field.

This gentleman who, in the newly established Republic of the United States of America, signed himself simply, "A. M. Quesnay" was Alexander-Marie Quesnay, Chevalier de Beurepaire, grandson of Francois Quesnay, the famous philosopher, economist and first consulting physician to Louis XV.³ Before coming to America, young Quesnay had been a member of the Mendarmes de la Garde du Roi.⁴ He was twenty-one years old when, in 1777, he arrived in Virginia to serve in the War of Independence of the American Colonies. He served for eighteen months with the rank of captain.⁵ Then, he records in his Memoir, at a time when a severe illness had made continued service in the army impossible, he suffered the loss of his luggage and all his papers and letters of recommendation, "mislaide in the office of the Governor P. H. [Patrick Henry]"⁶ to whom he had entrusted them. He was, at this time, taken into the home of John Peyton, of Gloucester County, Virginia, where he remained for more than a year.⁷

It was while he was staying with John Peyton that he first conceived the idea of his academy, and it was John Page of "Rosewell"

³ Encyclopaedia Britannica (Chicago, 1944), XVIII, 847.

⁴ King Logan Forsythe, "Alexander-Marie Quesnay," Dictionary of American Biography (New York, 1936), XV, 300.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Quesnay de Beurepaire, Memoir Concerning the Academy of the Arts and Sciences, at Richmond, Virginia, translated from the French by Roswell Page (Richmond, Virginia, 1922), 16.

⁷ He remained with Peyton from the fall of 1778 until early in the year of 1780, Dictionary of American Biography, XV, 300.

to whom he gave the credit for inspiring it.⁸ Of the friends that he made in Peyton's home, he says, "they dreamed of making Richmond the capitol of the State,"⁹ but when he left Peyton's home, in 1780, Richmond was little more than a dream,¹⁰ and Quesnay could hardly have considered it an inviting location for his Academy of Arts and Sciences. It is understandable, then, that he set out for the larger cities in the North in search of a more fitting location. His first stop would seem to have been Baltimore,¹¹ but there is little information available concerning his stay there. The first record we have of his five years of wandering comes from Philadelphia, where he opened a school. On January 2, 1782, Alexander Quesnay, "with a number of young gentlemen students"¹² of the French language, presented Beaumarchais' Eugenie in French and the farce, The Lying Valet, in English at the Southwark Theatre.¹³ This performance, given before a "brilliant assemblage" which included George Washington and the Minister of

⁸ Quesnay, Memoir, 10.

⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰ By the Act of 1779, the seat of government was moved from Williamsburg to Richmond, but the actual removal did not occur until the following year.

¹¹ Quesnay, in his Memoir, lists twelve Baltimore residents who had given him support in the founding of his Academy. It is therefore reasonable to believe that he stayed in Baltimore long enough to solicit support. His itinerary (Appendix II) compiled from the available references on Quesnay, suggests that he may well have stopped in Baltimore on his way to Philadelphia.

¹² Pollock, The Philadelphia Theatre, 40.

¹³ Ibid.

France, was a great success; and Quesnay announced "by request" a second performance of Eugenie, for January eleventh, coupled this time with the farce, The Cheats of Soapin. It was to be for the benefit of "the virtuous American Soldiery in the Barracks of Philadelphia" and the poor in the Pennsylvania Hospital.¹⁴ This bill, however, was never given. Quesnay had reckoned without the Quakers.¹⁵ He was forced to announce on January eighth that "no public Play will be exhibited at the Theatre in Southwark on Friday evening, nor any Exhibition made contrary to the Law."¹⁶ He had been mistaken about Philadelphia and its desire for good entertainment. With a parting thrust, he concluded that he "was also mistaken with respect to the Soldiery."¹⁷

Eugenie was Quesnay's first and last attempt at public theatrical production in Philadelphia; but having drawn attention to himself in that one attempt, his school, and "Academy of Polite Science," also received criticism. In answer to this criticism, he announced that it was not his intention to elude or violate any point of law, or oppose the worthy magistrates in the execution of their offices. As a for-

¹⁴ Pollock, The Philadelphia Theatre, 41.

¹⁵ The Quakers so strongly opposed any attempt to repeal the laws prohibiting theatrical entertainment in Philadelphia, that it was not until March 2, 1789 that these laws were at last repealed. Pollock, The Philadelphia Theatre, 41-48.

¹⁶ Quoted by Pollock from Freeman's Journal. Idem., 41.

¹⁷ Ibid.

signer and friend of America, he had, he insisted, used his utmost endeavors to promote and furnish useful amusements to the gentlemen of the army; he therefore begged that his house would no longer be considered as a theatre, but as Mr. Quesnay's Academy. He promised to raise the pit to the level of the stage, dismantle the scenery¹⁸ and turn the whole into a capacious and elegant ball-room.¹⁹

While he was thus trying to feel out the desires and demands of the general public and placate the magistrates so as to protect his school, he was also working indefatigably among people of influence to promote an incredibly ambitious and extensive Academy. This is evident from the following letter written by Benjamin Franklin's daughter to her father.

Philadelphia, February 27, 1783

My dear and Honored Father:

With this letter you will receive a project for a French Academy which is to be established here. It is a very extensive plan and will do honor to the gentleman who has designed it as well as to America. If it can be executed, it will in no way interfere with the plans of the colleges; it will be solely for the completion of the education of young men after they have graduated from college. Monsieur Quesnay regards you as the father of science in this country, and appreciates the advice and instruction which you have never failed to give to those whose talents are worthy of recognition. Money is the one thing needful, but you will be informed how you can be most servicable. I can conceive how occupied you must be in this important crisis; but as a mother who desires to give her children a useful and polite education and who will be especially proud to have them trained in her own country

¹⁸ It is evident from this indirect description of his Academy of Polite Science, that from the first, Quesnay placed strong emphasis upon the theatre in the curriculum of his school.

¹⁹ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 161.

and under her own eyes, I pray you give M. Quesnay all the assistance that may lay in your power. I will only add the love and respect of the family.

Your affectionate daughter,
SARA BACHE.²⁰

The "French Academy" described in this letter does not seem to tally with the "Academy of polite Science;" and in the years that were to follow, the established and the projected institutions were to become more and more divergent. This becomes more evident in Richmond where, in the fall of 1785, having failed to find a suitable location for his great Academy in Philadelphia and New York,²¹ he established another school. This school, as described in the advertisement which ran in several issues of the Virginia Gazette, has many interesting features.

MR. QUESNAY

Beys leave to inform the public that he intends to remain in this city as long as the encouragement he meets with at present, shall continue. He engages at all events, to remain for one year, from the first of February next.

As the DANCING SCHOOL properly understood, is recommended in the education of children for the only intention to give them a genteel carriage, and ease of manners in public, it is improper to employ all the time of their infancy to this part only; but they should have some time to study other accomplishments more useful, but unhappily very much neglected at present; therefore, the Dancing School of the Academy will, for the future, be attended only three days a week, and the other three days, shall be employed for those who wish to be instructed in DRAWING and PAINTING in general; MUSIC, and the FOREIGN LANGUAGES²² -- The Dancing Scholars for the

²⁰ This letter has been reproduced in Quesnay's Memoir, 17, and in Richard Heyward Gaines, "Richmond's First Academy, Projected by Mr. Quesnay de Beaurepaire in 1785," Virginia Historical Collections, new ser., XI (1892), 171.

²¹ Dictionary of American Biography, XV, 300.

²² This combination of arts and foreign languages is reminiscent of the Academy of polite Science in Philadelphia.

future shall pay 4 l. for thirty-six days, beside the entrance -- All other Branches shall be as formerly at one guinea for twelve lesson, beside the entrance.

Parents who wish their children to follow the regular mode of education, by subscribing for the year, shall have them instructed not only in the branches above mentioned, but also in GEOGRAPHY, ASTRONOMY, WRITING, and ARITHMETIC, for 45 l. per year, and 5 l. entrance.²³ The parents may depend, that such pains will be taken with their children, so as to bring them up in such a manner as if they had been educated in the best Academies in Europe, provided they remain a reasonable time for the purpose.

N. B. There will be kept in this city shortly, good Boarding Houses for any Ladies who may propose to attend the Academy. A reputable Lady in this town offers to board eight YOUNG LADIES, at 25 l. per year.²⁴ Apply to Mr. Quesnay.

*** It is entirely left to the opinion of the parents to have their children taught either by the lesson, week, month, quarter, or year; but the longest term will always be of the greatest advantage. YOUNG GENTLEMEN are also admitted to the Academy.²⁵

On the eighth of May, Quesnay announced that a beautiful situation of three acres, bordering on Main Street, has been purchased for the Academy building and its garden. Subscriptions which already exceeded one thousand pounds, were still being collected with considerable success. He therefore felt that he could assure the public that the Academy would be established by the beginning of the next winter. Until that time, he said, he would continue to teach in the house of Mr. Vanderwell. He also took this opportunity to ask

the subscribers to appoint trustees to superintend the conduct of the Masters, examine their qualifications, censure publicly and remove the undeserving, limit and direct the number and arrangement

²³ and ²⁴ The price charged for instruction would seem to be exactly twice as great as that asked for a year's board.

²⁵ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, January 14, 1786.

of balls, concerts, theatricals, and other public entertainments, and to design and lay out a pleasure garden.²⁶

He ended his long announcement with the very interesting explanation:

As one of the chief encouragements to the Masters who shall be employed by Dr. Quesnay in the Academy must flow from the public entertainments to be promoted therein, the price of teaching, from time to time, will greatly depend upon the success of such entertainments and the public favor that is extended to them.²⁷

Here then, was an institution of higher learning, much of whose success was to depend upon the quality and the monetary success of the public entertainments given within its walls. It would be interesting to know if Quesnay planned, eventually, to train his own students to take the parts of actors, dancers, and musicians in the theatrical productions. This would seem to have been the only way in which these productions could have been of any great value to the Academy financially. The Philadelphia Eugenie had been given by "a number of young gentleman students in the French language."²⁸ It is possible, however, that even here, the company was not entirely amateur. The Mr. Davids who gave the prologue at the opening of the Academy of Polite Science²⁹ may quite possibly have been a professional.³⁰ This notice which

²⁶ Virginia Gazette, or the American Advertiser, May 8, 1736.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Pollock, The Philadelphia Theatre, 40.

²⁹ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 151.

³⁰ Mr. Davids, after appearing with Quesnay's students, joined Ryan's American Company. Seilhamer speaks of him as a student of

explains so carefully the importance of dramatic entertainment in relation to the Academy, gives rise to speculation as to why Quesnay should have published at this time when the first productions under the plan were still a half year away. The answer probably lies in the fact that he was hoping to begin building soon, and the plans for the Academy included a large theatre with a seating capacity of sixteen hundred. Perhaps he was foreseeing the reaction of the inhabitants of that small town when they discovered that the Academy building was very little more than a theatre.³¹

It was the twenty-fourth of June before the cornerstone was laid, but it was done with all the pomp befitting an important building. On the Festival of Saint John the Baptist, the Masons met at their New Hall at eight, "were properly clothed and walked from thence in procession to Shookoe Hill, under salute of cannon, for the purpose of laying the cornerstone for Quesnay's Academy, being met by the trustees of this undertaking."³² The first stone was laid. Underneath it was

Quesnay's turned professional. The name "Davids" was prominent in Virginia casts of 1789-91 (At this time there were two Mr. Davids and one Mrs. Davids), and it would seem that the Davids were a theatrical family. It seems reasonable, also, that Eugenie, which was so well received by an audience not unlettered in theatrical affairs, may have had at least one professional in the cast.

³¹ The following notice from the Virginia Gazette, or American Advertiser, September 13, 1789, would seem to indicate that the theatre made up the greater part of the Academy building; "As the Hall of Quesnay's Academy will be for a short time occupied by Messrs. Hallam and Henry, as a theatre, during their residence in this city, the scholars shall attend in the private house now occupied for that purpose."

³² The Virginia Gazette, or American Advertiser, June 28, 1788.

placed a plate bearing the Latin inscription which, in translation, reads:

On this day, the 24th of June 1786
The Tenth of Independence
P. Henry, Governor
Was laid by the Trustees the 1st stone of
QUESNAY'S ACADEMY;
Which promises by it extensive utility,
To do honor to the Projector's ingenuity,
As well as those who had the good sense and generosity
To patronize his scheme.

J. HARVIE, MAYOR³³

There followed a ceremony of consecration with corn, wine, and oil, and the second stone was laid in the East by John Graves, Master of Lodge Number 13; and a silver plate was deposited underneath bearing the inscription:

The Corner Stone of an Academy
In the City of Richmond
A. M. Quesnay, President;
Laid by the
Master, Wardens and Brethren
of Lodge Number XIII
On the Feast of Saint John the Baptist,
AD. 1786 ---- AL. 5786
John Graves, M.³⁴

Mr. Quesnay gave the Masons a French salute of five guns on their quitting the grounds. The Masons then marched in a body back to their Hall to hear a sermon by the Reverend Mr. Buchanan.³⁵

It must indeed have been a solemn and moving occasion, this

³³ The Virginia Gazette, or American Advertiser, June 28, 1786.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

founding of a great national and international Academy of the Arts and Sciences with its branches in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York and its affiliation with the royal societies in London, Paris, Brussels, and with other learned bodies in Europe.³⁶ It would be difficult to find another example of a theatre whose cornerstone was laid by the city fathers in such a solemn and religious atmosphere.

The building, which was of wood, grew during the summer months. On the twenty-sixth of August, there was a notice in the newspaper, stating that Hallam and Henry had entered into Articles with Mr. Quesnay for the privilege of giving theatrical entertainments in the hall of his Academy for four years, not to exceed two months in the year, the season to begin the first day of the Richmond races.³⁷ Hallam and Henry agreed, on their part, that the performances of the Old American Company would be limited, in Virginia, to Richmond.³⁸

Hallam and Henry were the managers of the Old American Company, probably the most accomplished group of players, and certainly the best known, in the country at that time. Its antecedents stretched back to

³⁶ Gaines, "Richmond's First Academy," 189.

³⁷ The Virginia Gasette, August 26, 1786, quoted in Seibamer, History of the American Theatre, 204.

³⁸ Ibid., 206. This stipulation would seem to indicate that there were other theatres in Virginia in which they might play and other audiences eager to receive them. Otherwise it would not have been necessary for Quesnay to have preserved his monopoly in writing in this manner.

1752 when Lewis Hallam, Senior, with a company of comedians from London, landed at Yorktown and proceeded to Williamsburg where he opened his first theatrical season with a production of The Merchant of Venice and the farce The Anatomist.³⁹ In this first performance, Lewis Hallam, Junior, at the age of twelve, made "his first appearance on any stage"⁴⁰ as the Servant to Portia. The part called for only one line, but when the cue came for him to speak it, he faltered and then rushed from the stage in tears. Yet this boy with stage-fright maintained the only direct link between the company of comedians from London of 1752 and the Old American Company which initiated Quesnay's new theatre in Richmond in 1786.

John Henry had become a member of the company for the first time in 1767,⁴¹ and it was not until 1785 that he joined Hallam in the management of it. The two men opened the John Street Theatre in New York on the twenty-first of November, 1785, and enjoyed a prosperous season of eight months there⁴² until they closed on August 2nd. They took the company next to Baltimore where they played until the twelfth of September. On the thirteenth of that month, there appeared in the

³⁹ Virginia Gazette, September 26, 1761.

⁴⁰ Dunlap, American Theatre, 9.

⁴¹ Dictionary of American Biography, VIII, 548-49.

⁴² This was the first successful season since the Revolution. The company had met with constant rebuffs and had found it necessary to disguise their performances as poetical addresses or a "Lecture on Heads." Their first play was the farce The Citizen, given on September 20, 1785, three years after the South opened its doors to drama.



PLATE 2

LEWIS HALLAM, JUNIOR, FROM A MINIATURE

Virginia Gazette the notice:

As the Hall of Quesnay's Academy will be for a short time occupied by Messrs. Hallam and Henry, as a theatre, during their residence in this city, the scholars shall attend in the private house now occupied for that purpose.⁴³

From this notice, it would seem that the Hall of Quesnay's Academy had not as yet been used by the scholars. The theatre was now ready for the comedians who were to occupy it. Did the Academy contain anything other than a theatre? Seilhamer seemed to think that this building was a theatre which had been constructed by Quesnay for the use of Hallam and Henry in pursuance of his agreement with them.⁴⁴ Did Hallam and Henry come to Richmond, thinking that the Academy building was but a theatre that had been built for their use?

Answers have not yet been found to these questions. There is, on the whole project, only enough information available to set such questions spinning. Quesnay, who had been so prolific in his notices to the public, was silent for nearly three months; and Hallam and Henry did not advertise in the local papers during their stay in Richmond. From a copy of an old playbill, we know that the theatre opened on October 10, 1786 with a performance of School for Scandal.⁴⁵

⁴³ Virginia Gazette, or American Advertiser, September 13, 1786.

⁴⁴ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 205.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

This play, which has survived a hundred and fifty years of changing theatrical and literary taste, was first played at Drury Lane in London on May 8, 1777. It was not, however, in published form at that time. John Henry had brought to America with him a copy of the play which had been given him by his friend Sheridan.⁴⁶ He could thus be reasonably certain that he was offering his Richmond audience something entirely new. But was he? The first production of School for Scandal in the United States had been given in Baltimore on February 3, 1784 by Dennis Ryan's company; and since the play had been part of Ryan's repertory when his company played in Richmond in 1784, it is quite likely that Hallam and Henry found that they were not giving their audience as big a treat as they had reason to expect. If the audience had indeed seen the play before, it would be interesting to speculate upon how they compared the two productions. How did the acting of the two companies compare? How, indeed, did the two scripts compare--one from the hand of Sheridan himself and the other a pirated copy taken down by some actor or member of the audience during a London performance.

The next we hear of the Old American Company is on the nineteenth of October⁴⁷ when the company gave Alexander the Great by Nathaniel

⁴⁶ Mary Caroline Crawford, The Romance of the American Theatre (New York, 1940), 75.

⁴⁷ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 205.



PLATE 3

DRAWING OF JOHN HENRY
AS EPHRAIM SMOOTH IN WILD OATS

Lee, and John O'Keefe's ever popular opera, The Poor Soldier.⁴⁸ The next day's Virginia Gazette carried no review of the performance, but it did contain a notice to the effect that Mr. Henry would attend every Monday morning at his office, in the house lately occupied by Mr. Dickson, to pay any demand against the Old American Company.

The program for November 16, 1784⁴⁹ is of particular interest because the School for Scandal is repeated on it. During an engagement as short as the Old American Company had planned for Richmond, a play would not have been repeated unless it had been unusually successful on its first presentation. We can assume, then, that although no contemporary review records its success, the School for Scandal won an encore from its Richmond audiences. On this occasion, it shared a billing with the popular farce, Love-a-la-Mode.⁵⁰

Alexander Quesney was back in the news on the twenty-ninth of November with a long and most interesting advertisement. In it he stated that it had always been understood that there would be theatri-

⁴⁸ Between 1784 and 1799, The Poor Soldier was performed at least fifteen times in Virginia.

⁴⁹ Seilhamer evidently found a playbill or program for this performance which did not bear the name of the city in which the performance was given. He therefore says that it is not certain whether this bill was given in Richmond or in Annapolis. But the original Articles which provided for a two months stay in Richmond and the notice concerning the theatre in the November 29th Gazette seem to indicate Richmond as the location.

⁵⁰ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 205.

cal entertainments in the Academy. He however, lamented the necessity in which he had been obliged to make so great a use of the privilege that he had occasioned some people to imagine that he had forgotten the Academy for the theatre. He protested that, if he had sufficient property of his own to support the Academy, he would set aside the theatre; but he had already spent twelve hundred pounds of his own money and could afford no more. He suggested that, if theatrical amusements could be carried on so decently as not to interfere with the Schools,⁵¹ the profits arising from them could not be employed to better use.

In his next suggestion, Alexander Guesnay hit upon the idea, some hundred and fifty years before Robert Porterfield arrived at it, of accepting produce, as barter, for theatre tickets. The idea, which was not nearly so unusual in the eighteenth century as in the twentieth, no doubt occurred to both men when each was faced with the same problem,

⁵¹ Is there a hint in this statement that there had been some criticism of the company who found themselves working in the midst of a school for young ladies and gentlemen? Had the theatrical amusements been carried on so decently as not to interfere with the schools? John Henry's matrimonial arrangements were highly irregular. Two of the three living Storer sisters had, legally or otherwise, born his name, and the Maria Storer of the present cast was soon to adopt it. The Miss. Tuke of the company was soon to become the second Mrs. Henry, although the first Mrs. Henry seems to have been living in Williamsburg with Sarah Hallam. This same Miss. Tuke was soon, as Mrs. Hallam, to stir up a great deal of adverse criticism because of her excessive drinking. The company was probably also beginning to feel the dissension within its ranks which led to the withdrawal of Mr. Lake and the Anna family and fostered the maneuvers which deprived Henry of his part in the management. All in all, it is quite possible that the parents of the young ladies and gentlemen of the Academy found the stories brought home by the young scholars disquieting.

a potential audience at once eager and penniless in an agricultural community. Trade was very dull in Richmond in the fall of 1786, expenses were high and money scarce;⁵² Quesnay therefore offered to "take produce at the door to be used by an inhabitant."⁵³

This long advertisement concludes with the offer to take three orphans of the late war and teach them gratis for seven years, at the end of which time they were to be sent to Italy for further study at Mr. Quesnay's expense.⁵⁴

There is something in the tone of this advertisement which is reminiscent of Quesnay's attempt to placate the Philadelphia public in 1782. At that time, he had begged that his house no longer be considered as a theatre. Had he tried the same tactics on the Richmonders? The "Academy" building seems to have been a large theatre--and nothing more. It had been ready for occupancy by Hallam and Henry early in September; yet the school continued to meet in a private house across from the new capitol building⁵⁵ nearby. Although Quesnay promised on the twenty-ninth of November that the school would soon occupy its new

⁵² Hunter, Quebec to Carolina, 236

⁵³ Virginia Gazette, or the American Advertiser, November 29, 1786.

⁵⁴ Ibid. This is excellent publicity; but Quesnay had said he would stay but one more year and that year was almost gone. He must indeed have been making plans for his departure as he wrote this, for he left Virginia on December 28th.

⁵⁵ Hunter, Quebec to Carolina, 237

quarters, it is extremely doubtful that it ever did.⁵⁶ If the Academy was less of an institution of higher learning than the mayor and the other dignitaries of the city, who had laid its cornerstone with so much pomp less than six months before, had reason to expect, the Old American Company was purely theatrical and would hardly be likely to make any pretense of being academic. On the other hand, during their stay in Richmond, Hallam and Henry did not advertise their productions in the paper, and their names were not mentioned in the records of the Common Hall. Common Hall records show no request for permission to play, no regulations concerning the conduct of the comedians, no ordinances concerning the usual taxes levied on theatrical entertainment. Were the actors, then, masquerading in academic sheep skins?

If such were the case, it would point to one of the reasons why Hallam and Henry were not successful in Richmond. Although no box office receipts remain, from which to pronounce the season a failure, Hallam and Henry evidently did not consider it successful enough to warrant their return the following year, regardless of the fact that theatrical entertainment was by no means welcomed in Philadelphia and

⁵⁶ Alexander Quesnay left for France on the twenty-eighth of December, and on January first, a Mr. Capus, from the Royal Opera in Paris advertised a school in the house recently occupied by Mr. Quesnay. It seems doubtful that a leaderless Academy would have survived in the new building in competition to this. The Academy is not again mentioned in the newspapers after the departure in December of Quesnay for Paris.

New York to which they returned.⁵⁷ In Philadelphia the law against the theatre had been enlarged to include pantomime;⁵⁸ in New York "Hallam and Henry were tolerated, if sullenly, by stern censors."⁵⁹

There was still a good potential audience in Richmond; but to the men who had spent time, money and dreams in helping to create an Academy of Arts and Sciences with international scope, the experience of hatching out, instead, a theatre which was not appreciably better than, or even different from, the theatres they had known previously, must have been disillusioning. If they, then, gave these comedians in academic sheepskins less encouragement than the players had expected, it is understandable.

Another reason for Hallam and Henry's failure in Richmond may quite possibly have rested in the personality of Lewis Hallam, Junior, himself. As an actor, he had always been much admired. He was slender and not unattractive in appearance; and he strode the stage in a wide variety of parts with grace, vigor and assurance. As a manager, however, he was crafty, parsimonious and quarrelsome.⁶⁰ The years during

⁵⁷ In the North, it was still considered most expedient to disguise their performances. On its return to Philadelphia, the Old American Company advertised "a concert of music and lectures."

⁵⁸ Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania, chap. 1248 (XII), September 25, 1788, quoted in Pollock, The Philadelphia Theatre, 137.

⁵⁹ Odell, Annals, I, 247.

⁶⁰ Dictionary of American Biography, VIII, 149.

which Hallam managed the Old American Company are remarkable for the number of partners he had and for the number and seriousness of the quarrels he had with each one of them.⁶¹

It may well be, also, that failure was spelled for the Old American Company by the size of the theatre in which it played. If this playhouse did, indeed, contain sixteen hundred seats, it was unquestionably ill-suited to a town with a total population of under four thousand people.⁶² If nearly half of the inhabitants of the town, young and old, black and white, free and slave, must attend the play on the same night in order to fill the theatre, a poor house was inevitable. The term "a poor house" although relative, might well be applied to any audience which numbered less than one half of the seating capacity of the theatre in which it gathered. An audience of six or seven hundred people would, then, have been a poor house when gathered in Quesnay's Academy. On the other hand, the same number of people gathered together in a building which they filled, would constitute a good house. A compact audience gains warmth and a feeling of participation from one another as well as from the actors. Laughter and applause which travels from person to person in an audience like elec-

⁶¹ Hallam's partners included Allen, Henry, Hodgekinson, and Dunlap. Some of the quarrels Hallam had with his associates were aired in the newspapers. Others are related in detail by Hodgekinson in a pamphlet he wrote in defence of his own actions in a prolonged quarrel with Hallam.

⁶² First Census of the United States, 1790 gives the population of Richmond as 3,761.

tricity, falters at empty seats and dies away at empty rows; and Quesnay's Academy must have known both varieties of vacancies. The price range of the tickets which made a distinction between boxes, pit and gallery would have scattered the spectators much too thinly in the large theatre for their own enjoyment. In considering the fact that actors are not happy when playing to a small house, and that purchasers of tickets, schooled in the law of supply and demand, feel cheated at whatever price they paid when they see large blocks of empty seats around them, it becomes evident that Quesnay's Academy theatre was not as great an asset as it may have appeared at first. Indeed, it may well have contributed to Hallam and Henry's decision to leave Richmond with no plans for a return engagement.

Two other things which may have deterred Hallam and Henry from making future trips to Richmond may have been the competition of Heard's company and, more important, the personality and plans of Quesnay. It is quite possible that the comedians found him a difficult partner. If, as he announced in the newspapers, Quesnay expected the theatre to pay the salaries of the teachers in the Academy, he must have, of necessity, demanded large sums from Hallam and Henry either in the form of a high rent or a percentage of the door receipts. Whatever the cause or causes, Hallam and Henry left Richmond early in December of 1786 never to return. Later in December, Quesnay also left⁸⁵ - never

⁸⁵ Letter from James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, Williamsburg, December 28, 1786, William and Mary Quarterly, V sec. ser. (1928), 85.

to return.

It is interesting to speculate upon whether, when Quesnay left Virginia, he had any intention of returning to his Academy. Certainly he gave the impression to the readers of his Memoir Concerning the Academy of Arts and Sciences, at Richmond, Virginia that he had every intention of returning; however, when a Mr. Capus, "from the Royal Opera in Paris"⁶⁴ advertised that he intended opening a dancing school in the house lately occupied by Mr. Quesnay, it is difficult to believe that Quesnay was not cognizant of the fact and in accordance with the idea; for the advertisement appeared within three days after his departure for France. If indeed, he did intend to return, his plans were upset by the objections of his family and the growing turmoil of the insipient French Revolution.⁶⁵

For us, he remains a paradoxical figure, hailed by writers on education⁶⁶ as an educator who, but for adverse circumstances beyond his control, might have established a world-wide academy of arts and sciences in America. His ideas, they point out, form one of the foundation stones upon which the University of Virginia was founded.

⁶⁴ Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, January 1, 1787.

⁶⁵ Dictionary of American Biography, XV, 301.

⁶⁶ H. B. Adams, Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia; Philip Alexander Bruce, History of the University of Virginia (New York), 1920.

On the other hand, writers on the early history of our theatre⁶⁷ refer to him as an "erstwhile dancing master"⁶⁸ who dabbled with only partial success in dance and drama. There is little doubt, however, that he was above all else a remarkably talented promoter who knew how to garb present facts and future plans so as best to appeal to possible supporters and contributors. Certainly the people listed in his Memoirs as supporters of the Academy would make the modern promotion manager amazed and envious. Alexander-Marie Quesnay, Chevalier de Beaurepaire left Richmond as enigmatic a figure as he had entered it. This thirty year old Frenchman had "sold" such men as Thomas Paine, Benjamin West, Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Randolph, the Marquis de la Fayette⁶⁹ and many others of equal prominence, on the idea of amazingly ambitious plans for an international academy whose center was to have been in a small town⁷⁰ - an agricultural community, in a country only falteringly emerging from its colonial childhood.

With Quesnay's departure for France, the Academy slipped into oblivion. All that remained was an unfinished⁷¹ barnlike, wooden

⁶⁷ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II; Pollock, The Philadelphia Theatre.

⁶⁸ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 72.

⁶⁹ Quesnay, Memoir, 36-44.

⁷⁰ Richmond had less than four thousand inhabitants when the first census was taken in 1790.

⁷¹ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, on November 15, 1787, advertises a performance "for the purpose of finishing the Academy."

structure, which was to be the center of public entertainment for the remainder of the century. Quesnay had given to the Richmond audience, a playhouse.

CHAPTER III

Makeshift Performances:

Remnants of Ryan's and Hallam and Henry's Companies

Godwin and McGrath

CHAPTER III

In 1787, the fighting of the Revolution was five years past, and the physical wounds resulting from it were largely healed over; but the people of Virginia were still faced with the urgent problem of how best to safeguard and use their hard-won privileges and powers. Bound but tenuously to the Union by the inadequate Articles of Confederation and, in their own state, urged by James Madison¹ to accept stronger bonds of federation and eloquently implored by Patrick Henry² to hold to their separate independence; continuously hampered by the unsound financial foundations upon which their daily business transactions were built; and uneasy at the news of the Shaysite's³ rebellion at a similiar situation in the North, Virginians still possessed the talent for relaxation and enjoyment of public entertainment.

Although the actors might well complain of Virginia towns, that

¹ Madison, prominent among those who formed the Virginia plan about which the federal constitution was woven, was the leading force in the fight to secure the adoption of that constitution by Virginia in 1788.

² Patrick Henry's reasons for opposing the constitution are well set forth in Moses Coit Tyler, Patrick Henry (American Statesmen), ed. John T. Morse, Jr. [Boston and New York, 1888], 273-294.

³ The devaluation of the Continental Currency which gave rise to the expression "not worth a continental" led to Shay's Rebellion in January of 1787. It was put down in ten days and only three people were killed, but it never-the-less sent a shiver of apprehension down the spines of the Conservatives.

Too many Madisons in them are found,
 Instead of fun, who study now the nation,
 And talk of politics and reformation,⁴

there was still an "audience of penniless men" who "eager to forget their money troubles, crowded the theatre to suffocation."⁶

There had been a company of comedians playing almost constantly in Virginia since Dennis Ryan's first production in Richmond in 1784. Norfolk, Richmond, Petersburg and Bath had witnessed the performance of professional actors; and we have reasons for believing that Fredericksburg and perhaps Alexandria had also had the opportunity of seeing these comedians.

In the four years since 1784, when Ryan had brought theatre back to Virginia, there had been at least three different companies playing there. At first glance, this might seem to indicate that each company had come to Virginia in the hope of making it a permanent home or a part of its annual tour, only to find the audiences there unable or unwilling to support it. On looking closer, however, this seems unlikely. It was the death of Dennis Ryan which prevented the return of his company; and although his American Company failed to return as such, two-thirds of its known members did return in subsequent years.⁶

⁴ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, III, 11.

⁵ Allan Nevins, The American States.

⁶ Of the known casts, only the Ryans and the Smiths fail to appear in the casts of plays given in Virginia in later years.

The same thing is true of Hallow and Henry's Old American Company. Although the company never returned to Richmond, several of its members did. Mr. Lake remained in Virginia after the American Company left, and his name appears in the casts of plays given in Richmond in 1787. The Kenna family, which included Mr. and Mrs. Kenna, Mr. and Mrs. J. Kenna and Miss Kenna, departed with the Old American Company in 1786; but they returned south in 1788 and continued to play there for a number of years.⁷

The company which played in Richmond in 1787 was made up, for the most part, of familiar faces. These included Mr. and Mrs. Lewis,⁸ Mr. Lake, Mrs. Rankin, who was the former Mrs. Remington who had appeared in Richmond in 1785,⁹ and Mr. Kidd.¹⁰ There was also a Mrs. Giffard, from the Theatre Royal, Dublin. She had been a member of Mrs. Ryan's Baltimore company in the early months of 1786,¹¹ at which time she had been singled out by at least one newspaper for special praise

⁷ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, 181, 211.

⁸ Mrs. Lewis' name does not appear on the few, incomplete programs available, but we know that she was playing supporting parts with her husband shortly before and after this time.

⁹ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, December 6, 1787.

¹⁰ Mr. Kidd went to Charleston with the Ryans in 1785. In August of that year, he opened with his wife and Mr. and Mrs. Godwin, a theatre in Savannah, Georgia. That failing, he had returned to Charleston to play under the management of Godwin until this company, too, failed; disbanded in April of 1787.

¹¹ Willis, The Charleston Stage of the XVIII Century, 108.

for uniting "elegance and grace with spirited action and judicious emphasis."¹² She next appeared with the Old American Company in February of 1787.¹³ It therefore seems a likely guess that she was in Richmond with that company during the preceeding fall. A Mr. Smallwood appeared in the New York casts of Rallam and Henry at about the same time as did Mrs. Giffard. He may or may not have joined the company before or during their Richmond season. He seems to have been a minor character, although his wife was considered important enough to merit a benefit in Richmond in the fall of 1787.¹⁴

The newspapers list only one actor as making "his first appearance on this stage."¹⁵ He was a Mr. Rankin about whom little is known except that he had recently married Mrs. Remington.¹⁶ There are other names which are new to us although they would appear not to have been new to the residents of Richmond of that year. These are Mr. Wells, Mr. Bisset, and Mr. and Mrs. Parsons. It is unfortunate that we know so little about these people or about the company of which they were a part. Did the company have a name? Who was its manager? In what

¹² Willis, The Charleston Stage of the XVIII Century, 109.

¹³ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 214.

¹⁴ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, November 8, 1787.

¹⁵ Ibid., December 6, 1787.

¹⁶ Mr. Rankin appears again in Philadelphia in 1792. After this he disappears although Mrs. Rankin's name continues to appear in the New York and Philadelphia bills for several years.

other than Richmond and Petersburg, did it play? For these questions, we have no definite answers. It seems probable that they played in Norfolk and Fredericksburg as well as Richmond. It is possible that they also played short engagements in many smaller places. It seems possible (and it ties together the scattered bits of information we possess) that this company had been in existence through changes of personnel and management since 1784. Only about one half of the Baltimore company seem to have played at Richmond. The others seem to have disappeared temporarily. This is true of Mrs. Parsons and Mr. Davids. We find no mention of Mr. Heard, one of its strongest actors, until April of 1786 when he is said to have been managing a company of his own at Norfolk. Mr. Smith, who played in Richmond with Dennis Ryan, did not go to Charleston with him. He does, however, appear in Charleston two years later, having arrived "from the Northward" in the company of Mr. Atherton and Mr. Shakespeare,¹⁷ neither of whom had been heard from since the Baltimore company had started south. Had they, in the interim, been with Mr. Heard in Norfolk and Petersburg? Who were the comedians who performed in Richmond in the fall of 1785, after Dennis Ryan had returned to Baltimore with his company? Who were the players in Petersburg in 1786? Could it not be that the company playing in Richmond in 1787 was the same company, having lost Mr. Atherton and Mr. Shakespeare to the Charleston theatre, having lost Mr. and Mrs. Kidd to Savannah and Charleston and then taken them back

¹⁷ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 125

into the fold, and having added Mr. Lake and perhaps Mrs. Gifford from the Old American Company and Mr. Rankin from the amateur ranks? If Mr. Beard had, indeed, been the manager of this company for the past three years, he had by 1787 relinquished it.¹⁸ All this is, of course, conjecture. We know only that a company of players were performing in Richmond in the fall of 1787 and that they do not appear to be strangers to the residents there. It was not a strong company; nor was it well balanced in talent for the comedy, tragedy, farce and opera which was expected of it. Its best actors were women: Mrs. Rankin and Mrs. Gifford. Mrs. Gifford was "an old performer, excellently studied in stage affairs,"¹⁹ and yet, we are told, spirited.²⁰ Mrs. Rankin, who had played in Richmond in 1785 as Mrs. Remington, appeared in New York under that name in 1786, as Mrs. Malaprop in the Rivals, as Sally in Thomas and Sally, and as Rosetta in Love in a Village.²¹ The two leading men were described in an article, which undoubtedly seeks to praise them, as Mr. Lewis, "Pleasant in light characters, and Mr. Kidd, respectable in solid parts of great length and level speaking."²² If however, the players had little to give, the people of Richmond had little to give in return. In January, 1787, the town had suffered from

¹⁸ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 222.

¹⁹ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 108.

²⁰ Ibid., 109.

²¹ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 181.

²² Willis, The Charleston Stage, 108.

a devastating fire which had destroyed forty to fifty stores and houses at a loss of about a half a million dollars.²³ This disaster, although it must certainly have forced the Richmonders to tighten their purse strings, did nothing to slacken their interest in dance and drama. Mr. Capus, from the Royal Opera, continued to advertise his dancing school; and in March,²⁴ Thomas Nicholson, printer of The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser filled the poetry columns of his paper with songs from O'Keeffe's opera, The Poor Soldier, presumably because they had been so popular since the production of that opera the preceeding fall. By September, Nicholson had issued the entire opera in book form and was offering it for sale.²⁵

It was probably late September or early October of 1787 when the players came to town. It is impossible to fix the exact date of their opening; for they did not advertize their performances until the end of their season when the Benefits began. Advertising was expensive, and the lack of it in this case was no doubt due to a lack of cash on the part of the management. For their Benefits, the actors inserted their own notices. Thus, on November eighth, the first notice appeared, advertising the Benefit of Mrs. Smallwood, which was to consist of productions of King Henry IV and Miss In Her Teens, and was to take

²³ Beveridge, Life of John Marshall, 190; Christian, Richmond, 30.

²⁴ March 15, 20, and 29, 1787.

²⁵ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, September 27, 1787. This notice was repeated more or less regularly for the rest of the year.

place in the "New Theatre on Shokoe Hill."²⁶ Beyond the scanty information in this notice, we know nothing. Undoubtedly, it was a strain upon the Smallwood purse to tell us this much.

Mr. Bisset was the most opulent member of the company--or perhaps he was only the greatest gambler. For his Benefit, he inserted in the local paper the longest notice and the only cast which was presented that season. His program consisted of the ever-popular Beggar's Opera,²⁷ songs which he sang with Mr. Wells, Mackin's farce, Love-A-La-Mode, and a comic song, which he himself sang, called "Four and Twenty Fiddlers All In A Row."²⁸

The most interesting Benefit of the season was that given on November fifteenth "for the purpose of finishing the Academy."²⁹ This notice poses a multitude of questions. What finishing was necessary? Who authorized it? How much money was collected and how was it used? And what of Alexander Quesnay who was in Paris, seeking backing for this same Academy? We know only that the Recruiting Officer and Lethe

²⁶ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, November 8, 1787.

²⁷ William Warland Clapp, in his book, A Record of the Boston Stage (Boston, 1853), 114, quotes Pennell:

The Beggar's Opera, they say,
(Sure fashion is a witch;)
Made Rich, the manager, be Gay,
And, Gay, the author, rich.

²⁸ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, December 6, 1787.

²⁹ Ibid., November 15, 1787.

were given at the New Theatre on Shockoe Hill "for the purpose of finishing the Academy."³⁰

The season closed early in December, and although most of the actors reappear from time to time in Virginia casts for many years to come, this particular company seems to have disappeared. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis were next seen in Fredericksburg in June of 1788 where they gave "an Olio of theatrical entertainments . . . to discharge some few debts."³¹

We have no evidence that any plays were presented in Richmond during the fall of 1788. This seems odd; for the people still evinced a lively interest in all things theatrical. Mr. Capus, assisted now by Mr. Moody, continued to give dancing lessons.³² Magazines which contained, among other things, the farce, Devil Upon Two Sticks were imported from London.³³ There were proposals for printing, by subscription, The Contrast, which was to contain "a most interesting scenic engraving by an American artist."³⁴ The newspaper printed "A Whimsical Letter, Written by David Garrick to his prompter."³⁵ And for the

³⁰ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, November 15, 1787.

³¹ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 187.

³² The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, February 28, 1788.

³³ Ibid., March 8, 1788.

³⁴ Virginia Independant Chronicle, October 25, 1788.

³⁵ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, September 17, 1788.

curious, "A Wild Beast called A Moose!"³⁶ was exhibited at Mr. Marster-son's house, opposite the courthouse.

Although no theatrical company was advertising in the newspapers, Quesnay's Academy, or the New Theatre on Shockoe Hill, as it had come to be called, was sheltering its greatest drama: the heated debates which eventually led to the ratification of the Constitution of the United States.³⁷ There, on the platform built as a stage, Patrick Henry borrowed the actor's art to convince his audience that they must not surrender a thread of their state's independence to this still chimerical Union. Using, with extraordinary skill, the actor's art, he obtained the actor's reward. Even his greatest opponents were moved. He "held" his audience, and as an audience, they believed--but only as long as the magic illusion of the stage was not broken. As a great theatrical performance, Patrick Henry's speeches on this occasion were remembered throughout the lives of those who heard them;³⁸ but as an effective tool in political endeavour, their power had been too transitory.

While the residents of Richmond thus witnessed in the New Theatre

³⁶ The Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser, October 9, 1788.

³⁷ Mordecai, Richmond in By-Gone Days.

³⁸ William Wirt, in his Sketches of the Life of Patrick Henry (Hartford, 1862), 313, tells of a highly theatrical speech which Henry made on June 24, 1788, during which nature itself afforded the perfect stage effects in the form of a thunderstorm.

on Shockoe Hill a stirring drama of momentous import, other Virginians enjoyed their usual theatrical fare. The Kenna family, having left the Old American Company where Mrs. Kenna's ambitions and abilities had conflicted with those of the established members of the company, were on a protracted tour of the South.³⁹ They played Newbern and Wilmington in North Carolina;⁴⁰ and in October of 1789 they advertised their end-of-the season benefits in Fredericksburg.⁴¹ Their company was not a strong one, although it boasted two, and perhaps three, excellent actors. The Kenna family had arrived in New York on the brig Detsy on the fifteenth of May in 1786.⁴² Two days later, Mrs. Kenna appeared with the Old American Company in the leading role in Southerne's tragedy Isabella.⁴³ She was well received, a critic of the day writing that her performance seemed "completely studied to raise the admiration and tender feelings of a generous and candid audience."⁴⁴ After her performance of Alcioia in Jane Shore, the Daily Advertiser said of her, "To exhibit the tumultuous and turbulent passions of our nature in a masterly manner, appears to be her forte. When she

³⁹ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 181, 211.

⁴⁰ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 184.

⁴¹ The Virginia Herald and Fredericksburg Advertiser, October 22, 1789.

⁴² Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 181.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 188.

expresses anger, rage, indignation, horror, despair (sic.), you think you see the real image--you can scarcely suppose you see a fictitious character. Nature seems to be actually convulsed. We should be pleased to see her oftener come upon the stage in some leading characters."⁴⁵ The reason that Mrs. Kenna was not seen in more leading roles, was that, to obtain the best parts, she must compete with Mrs. Morris, who had been with the American Company in Jamaica and now claimed all the best parts as her special privilege. It had only been because of Mrs. Morris' illness, that Mrs. Kenna had been given the opportunity to appear in important roles.⁴⁶

Mr. J. Kenna, who was an accomplished comedian, was also faced with competition for parts in which the scales were heavily weighted against him; for his rivals were Mr. Wignell and Lewis Hallam, Junior, himself.

This unfair competition and the growing unpopularity of the rest of the Kenna family, taken together, were responsible for their break with the Old American Company and their southern tour. As one critic put it, Mrs. Kenna "is unfortunate in being connected with a husband who guzzles fat beef--and with a gawky son whose eyes pass and cross under his nose, and whose tongue is tied, and with a daughter who ought

⁴⁵ Odell, Annals of the New York Stage, I, 258.

⁴⁶ Among other important roles, Mrs. Kenna had had the opportunity of playing Rosalind in the first American production of As You Like It.

to beat hemp in Bridewell."⁴⁷ The company which played at Fredericksburg in 1789 was made up of both the good and the bad of the Kenna family. The company also included Mr. Free, Mr. and Mrs. McGrath, Mr. Hallam, Mr. Solomon, Miss Bush and Master Fitzgerald. Of most of these actors, we know nothing. Mr. Solomon seems to have been an adequate and useful player who remained with the Kennas for several years.⁴⁸ Mr. Hallam was in spite of his illustrious name, a mediocre actor. He was Mirvin Hallam, a son, by his first wife, of Lewis Hallam, Junior. It was unfortunate for him that he wore a name which had come to mean good theatre to so many Virginians. That name no doubt procured for him parts to which he was unequal⁴⁹ and then invited unfavorable comparisons.

One of the best, and certainly one of the most interesting members of the Fredericksburg company of 1789 was Christopher Charles McGrath. He had made his first appearance, in Charleston, in 1787 and had been well received. By now, he was no doubt well initiated in the ways of a strolling player--ways which he was to follow for the rest of his life.⁵⁰ He is perhaps best described by Godwin, who was, for

47 Odell, Annals of the New York Stage, I, 258.

48 He appeared with them in Philadelphia in 1791 and 1792.

49 He is considered important enough to warrant a benefit the first time we encounter his name. He played such parts as Charles Surface in School for Scandal and Belcour in The West Indian.

50 He died in Reading, Pennsylvania on February 23, 1799 after twelve years of constant traveling and playing short engagements in the smaller towns of Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia.

some years, his partner, as "a spoiled priest, turned itinerant player" and a "jack of all trades, singer, actor, author, manager," who was "capable of doing a smart piece either in prose or verse."⁵¹

This then, was the company that played in Fredericksburg in 1789, and, undoubtedly, in other southern towns as well. We have a hint that they played in Norfolk,⁵² and we know that they had played in at least two towns in North Carolina.⁵³ We have no record to prove that they played in Richmond or Petersburg that year, but it seems reasonable to believe that they did.⁵⁴

In addition to the productions of this company of comedians, there were other performances in Virginia of a theatrical nature. In Fredericksburg, William Powers, a fourteen year old boy from England, advertised "Feats of Activity," a program of gymnastic exercises which had proved very popular in the eighteenth century.

⁵¹ Sonneck, Early Opera, 163.

⁵² In a Norfolk playbill for 1795, Mr. McGrath is noted as appearing for the first time in five years.

⁵³ Seilhamer, in his History of the American Theatre, II, 211, places them in Newbern, North Carolina in June, and in Wilmington in July.

⁵⁴ The scarcity of records in the form of newspapers or broadsides, and the fact that this particular group seemed to be extremely economical when it came to advertising; make it impossible to prove at this time that they played in either of these towns. However, no one town could support them for long, and they did exist for at least two years in the south. Richmond and Petersburg each had a theatre and an audience which had heartily supported plays in the past and were to enjoy them again in the near future.

About the same time, Charles Busselot appeared in Petersburg.⁵⁵ He was a dashing young Frenchman, and excellent swordsman who had once been an officer in the guards of Louis XVI. He was also a skillful mechanician. He had done the scenery and special effects for Hallam and Allen, and in 1786-87 had advertised a puppet-show in Philadelphia.⁵⁶ These entertainments were embellished with transparent scenes and shades, "a representation of a sea-fight, a water mill and moving figures."⁵⁷ It is reasonable to suppose that he was giving a similar entertainment in Petersburg, probably with the assistance of Mr. Dumoulin, a dancer who performed with him in Fayetteville, North Carolina.⁵⁸

Such entertainments, produced by from one to six persons, were prevalent at this time. They took the form of exhibitions of special effects and mechanical figures, acrobatic stunts or feats of activity, exhibitions and often performances of wild animals, recitations and concerts. The inhabitants of Fredericksburg had the opportunity of

⁵⁵ Wyatt, "Three Petersburg Theatres," William and Mary Quarterly, 2nd ser., XXI (1941), 83.

⁵⁶ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 297.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ In a letter owned by Colonial Williamsburg, Incorporated, a benefit performance of Robinson Crusoe is announced. This pantomime was always done with a superabundance of special effects and would seem to be an ideal vehicle for the type of puppet-shows Busselot was known to have produced. Mr. Dumoulin is mentioned as dancing in the character of a clown. He would seem to be the same "Mr. Du Moulain" who was managing a troop of French rope dancers and pantomimists in Philadelphia in 1791-92.

seeing at least two such entertainments during 1790. Both of these were concerts. On May sixth, Mr. Kullin and Mr. Victor advertised a concert of vocal and instrumental music.⁵⁹ Mr. Victor was a teacher of harpsichord, pianoforte, spinet, guitar, a tuner and repairer of musical instruments who had moved to Fredericksburg from Port Royal in April of 1789.⁶⁰ Of Mr. Kullin, we know nothing, but we might hazard the guess that he sang. On November fourth another concert was given by Mirianne D'Remard, who was only five years old. She let it be known that she was from Paris and was only visiting in Fredericksburg after a triumphal tour of such important cities as Philadelphia, Baltimore, Alexandria and Richmond.⁶¹

In addition to these concerts, the residents of Fredericksburg enjoyed over five months of theatrical entertainment. Beginning on the twenty-ninth of April, "Godwin and M'Grath's Company of Comedians" played the comedy West Indian and the musical farce The Elopement.⁶² Mrs. Smallwood, whom we had last seen in Richmond in 1787, sang a song between the comedy and the farce. Their theatre at this time was the Market House, "elegantly fitted up"⁶³ for the occasion. However, in

⁵⁹ Fredericksburg Virginia Herald, May 6, 1790.

⁶⁰ Sonneck, Concert Life in America, 68

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Fredericksburg Virginia Herald, April 29, 1790

⁶³ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 187.

spite of the elegance with which the Market House was converted into a theatre, Mr. Godwin was soon collecting subscriptions for the construction of a new setting for his productions. By July, he was advertising for two gentlemen who would collect theatre subscriptions while he himself went on with the building.⁶⁴ He was the same Mr. Godwin who had played in Richmond in 1784 with Ryan's American Company. He had since opened, with Mr. Kidd, the first theatre in Savannah, Georgia and built Harmony Hall in Charleston, where he played for two seasons, ending March 28, 1787. He remained in Charleston, giving lectures and recitations, for about three months after disbanding his company.⁶⁵ For the next two and a half years, it is difficult to trace his wanderings,⁶⁶ but by 1790, he seemed well entrenched in the community of Fredericksburg. He had a company, in joint management with Mr. McGrath, playing in the Market House; he is building a theatre; and had opened a dancing school.⁶⁷

Godwin and McGrath's Company of Comedians do not seem to have had any more money to budget for advertising than had their predecessors; but from the very limited number of notices in the papers, we can

⁶⁴ Fredericksburg Virginia Herald, July 15, 1790.

⁶⁵ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 143-144.

⁶⁶ Willis does not locate him for five years. It seems reasonable to believe that an actor and dancer, who had been on the stage for twenty years, would, during these three years, continue giving entertainments of some kind.

⁶⁷ Fredericksburg Virginia Herald, July 15, 1790.

gather that this company was made up of many of the same actors who had played in Fredericksburg the year before. We find Mr. Free and Mr. Solomon, and Miss Bush again as well as Mr. McGrath; and it seems likely that Mr. Hallam and the Kenna family were also there.⁶⁸ There was also Mrs. Smallwood, who had played in Richmond three years before this, and a Mr. Whipple who, although he was considered important enough to merit a benefit at this time, did not appear in any other casts either before or after this date. Doubtless, there were others; for no cast was published in the newspapers this season. To have, however, only the names of those actors who were accorded benefits and those who were noted as singing songs between the two plays which were always offered on the same evening's program.

The repertoire of this company is of particular interest because of the high calibre of the drama which they offered. Here again, we have only a sampling from a season which seems to have stretched over five months; but this included: Richard the III, which was doubtless Colley Ciber's adaptation of the Shakespeare play,⁶⁹ Macbeth, Hamlet, School for Scandal, Poor Soldier and George Barnwell. This last play, written by George Lillo as The London Merchant; or, the History of

⁶⁸ These actors, who joined West and Bignall's company in 1791, were probably still with the company with which they had played in Fredericksburg in 1789.

⁶⁹ Alice L. F. Wood, The Stage History of Shakespeare's King Richard the Third (New York, 1909), 166.

George Barnwell, had been a favorite for many years.⁷⁰ It's story, taken from a seventeenth century ballad,⁷¹ concerned the misdeeds and ultimate fate of a London apprentice. George Barnwell's fall began when he was seduced by Sarah Milwood, to whom he gave two hundred pounds which he had stolen from his master. In an effort to extricate himself from the situation into which this action had catapulted him, he robbed and murdered his pious uncle. In the end, he and Sarah inform against each other, and both are hanged. How the final scene of this play should be acted, is suggested by the Thespian Preceptor, a book written to instruct the actor of the period. The despair which Barnwell feels as a condemned criminal:

binds the eyebrows downward, clouds the forehead, rolls the eyes, and sometimes bites the lips and gnashes the teeth. The heart is supposed to be much hardened to suffer tears to flow; yet the eye-balls will be red and inflamed. The head is hung down upon the breast; the arms are bended at the elbows, the fists clenched hard, and the whole body strained and violently agitated. Groans, expression of inward torture, accompany the words appertaining to his grief: those words are also uttered with a sullen, eager bitterness and the tone of his voice is often loud and furious.⁷²

It is interesting to speculate as to whether this play, acted in this manner, would move a modern audience. Certainly, eighteenth century audiences were moved by it. This fact may be attested by the

⁷⁰ First produced in 1731, the play continued to be popular for the next hundred years.

⁷¹ According to William Rose Benet, The Reader's Encyclopedia (New York, 1948), 77, George Barnwell was founded on a ballad contained in Percy's Reliques.

⁷² Thespian Preceptor; or, a Full Display of the Scenic Art: Including Ample and Easy Instructions for Treading the Stage (London, 1810), 33.

number of performances the play received, and by the following story which must have been repeated many times, both verbally and in print. In 1752, when Mr. Ross was performing the part of George Barnwell, the son of an eminent merchant was struck by the resemblance of the plot to his own perilous situation. He became so agitated that he succumbed to an illness, during which he confessed his error. His father forgave him and furnished him with the means of repairing the pecuniary damage he had done his employer. For nine or ten years after this occurrence, Mr. Ross received annually ten guineas and a note which read: "A tribute of gratitude from one who was highly obliged and saved from ruin by witnessing Mr. Ross' performance of George Barnwell."⁷³

Another program of interest was the pantomime The Genii; or, the Life and Death of Harlequin.⁷⁴ Harlequin and the other stock characters who invariably played with him, Pantaloon, Columbine, and Clown, were Italian importations of the Comedia del Arte. Although they were known in England in the latter part of the sixteenth century, they were rarely seen in America until the early part of the nineteenth century.⁷⁵ Harlequin seems to be the first introduced into America.

⁷³ This story was quoted in Clapp, The Boston Stage, 73-74, and in The Theatrical Censor (Philadelphia), 115.

⁷⁴ Fredericksburg Virginia Herald, July 15, 1790.

⁷⁵ Virginia Gazette PD (Williamsburg), April 14, 1768.

⁷⁶ Shookley, "History of the Theatre in Richmond," (unpublished Master's thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1939), 145-46.

This particular pantomime appears to be a simple one, an example of the form before Rich and Garrick had combined it with that of the court masque to produce the scenic splendor and startling effects of such productions as Don Juan and Robinson Crusoe.⁷⁷

Godwin and McGrath's Company of Comedians gave their last performance in Fredericksburg for 1790 on October seventh. This performance was a benefit for the town of Fredericksburg. The company fell to pieces soon after this, the better players finding more money and a more adequate vehicle from which to exhibit their talents,⁷⁸ and the poorer players disappearing from newspaper casts and playbills completely. Godwin and McGrath continued, together or with separate companies, to play short seasons in small towns for many years. Although these men were, in many ways dissimilar, they shared two characteristics. Each had an excessive sense of independence which made him desirous of being his own manager, and each had a love of the theatre which left him undaunted in the face of set backs which would have discouraged any other player. Neither man seems to have made much money of his own in his life time or, on the other hand, to have been completely destitute at any time. Godwin found the money somewhere to build Harmony Hall in Charleston, but any money of his own which he had

⁷⁷ A. E. Wilson, Aing Panto (New York, 1935), 58-64.

⁷⁸ Mr. Hallam and the Menna family joined the Virginia Company under West and Bignall where the salaries were undoubtedly higher and the plays were presented with more skill.

in the venture must certainly have been lost with the failure of that theatre. Twice, we know, he was reduced to giving dancing lessons.⁷⁹ McBrath spent the last nine years of his life playing small towns from York, Pennsylvania to Yorktown, Virginia.⁸⁰ Sometimes he shared the managership with Godwin; sometimes he managed alone. Sometimes he had a surprisingly large and strong company; sometimes he and his wife had almost no support. But no matter how large or small the company was or who the managers were, Mr. McBrath must have considered himself the whole show; for he sang songs which he had written, and cast himself in plays which he had written.⁸¹ These two men, singly and together, brought drama to many people who would not otherwise have had the opportunity of enjoying it; and the dramatic literature they brought was of the best. In stages hastily erected in taverns and market houses, with little or no scenery, and with casts which were inadequate in numbers and in the quality of their acting, they presented School for Scandal, She Stoops to Conquer, Richard III and Hamlet. They were

⁷⁹ Godwin first advertised a dancing school in partnership with Mr. Lafer in Charleston in 1788 at about the time he was opening Harmony Hall and was no doubt short of money because of the expense entailed in building a theatre and assembling a company to play in it. Willis, The Charleston Stage, 113. He seems to have found himself in the same predicament in Fredericksburg in 1790; for he advertises in the paper with two notices. In one, he announces that he will teach dancing; in the other, he requests help in collecting the subscriptions for the theatre while he himself goes on with the building. Fredericksburg Virginia Herald, July 15, 1790.

⁸⁰ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, 6-9.

⁸¹ Ibid.

not without competitors; competitors who completely outdistanced them in the quality of their productions. Still the old troupers, Godwin and McGrath, and the second rate actors who supported them, played on; and the audiences who knew them came back year after year.

This, then, was the first of many signs that Virginia audiences had a broad base in society, that the well-educated, discriminating upper-class was not alone in its love of the theatre. The theatre in Virginia belonged to the people as a whole. In many ways, it was one of Virginia's most democratic institutions.

CHAPTER IV

Post-War Prosperity

West and Signall and

The Beginnings of the Virginia Company

CHAPTER IV

By 1790, the birth pangs of the new nation had passed, and Americans who had rebelled against the government imposed by England were now learning to govern themselves as a national unit. The federal constitution, which had been so eloquently opposed by Patrick Henry, had become law. In accordance with it, a president had been elected, as had members of the two houses of Congress. A cabinet had been appointed to hold the most important reins of government, and the financial welfare of the country was now in the firm hands of the thirty-two year old Alexander Hamilton. Although greatly opposed in some quarters, the unshakable quality of his conservatism fostered confidence in business transactions, where it was much needed. The period of confusion, arising from the weak governing of the Continental Congress and resulting in business doldrums, was past, and a new period of prosperity was dawning.

It might be expected that the theatre, which has so often been considered a luxury, would profit by the improved state of the country. Actors who had been welcomed when the state was disrupted by war and disorganized by the newly won independence, had reason to feel optimistic about their future reception in it in a time of prosperity; and managers who had realized two hundred dollars in a night¹ when money

¹ John Bach McMaster, A History of the People of the United States, from the Revolution to the Civil War (New York, 1883), I, 424.

was scarce, no doubt had visions of doubling that figure when money flowed more freely.

It is however, doubtful that the improved complexion of the country aided the theatre as much as was expected. Whether they realized it or not, the managers of the first post-war theatres had tapped the potential audience in spite of "hard times;" for in a community which accepts theatre as wholesome relaxation and legitimate amusement, and enjoys it at "popular prices," the abundance or scarcity of money is but lightly felt within the playhouse.²

Perhaps it was not until this time of greater prosperity that the fundamental weakness of the Virginia audience becomes so readily apparent. This weakness was quantitative rather than qualitative; for the potential audience in Virginia, interested and eager as it was, was scattered across the state, not only in the five major cities, but also in hundreds of smaller communities and isolated plantations. How to reach such an audience was thus a very real problem. Dennis Ryan had taken a step toward solving it when he arranged his season in Richmond to coincide with the sitting of the state legislature. In this, he set a precedent followed by the managers who came after him, but this was, at best, only a partial answer, providing a larger audience for only a short period each fall. Godwin and McGrath, facing this same

² The continued popularity and consequent prosperity of the motion picture during the last depression is a modern example of this phenomenon.

problem, had sought to solve it by short stays in an endless succession of small towns. This, unfortunately, resulted in an equal succession of inadequate playhouses, and difficult working conditions for actors which, with the added drawback of scanty pay, resulted in a high turnover of personnel-- both conditions tending to depress the quality of the performances offered. The problem was indeed a difficult one, but it was not insuperable. The answer to it was found, in time, by an English actor whose name appears on Virginia playbills for the first time in 1790: Thomas Wade West.

Thomas Wade West, and his friend and future partner John Bignall, had come to America in 1789, with a letter of introduction to Lewis Hallam, Junior from his sister, Mrs. Maddocks.³ This letter suggested that West and Bignall and their families would prove valuable acquisitions to the Old American Company. There is no record of the encounter of Hallam and Henry with West and Bignall; but from criticisms of the Old American Company which were placed in the newspaper by Philadelphia's Dramatic Association and from the company's answers and explanations, we can gather that West and Bignall and their families were offered only two guineas a week each. It also appears that several of the parts which they wished to play were already claimed by the established members of the company.⁴ Whatever the

³ Seilhamer, *History of the American Theatre*, II, 330.

⁴ Ibid., 327-331.

reasons were for their change of plans, we know that they not only turned their backs on Hallam and Henry, but that they left Philadelphia and traveled south with plans for a company of their own.

It is interesting to speculate upon their choice of Virginia as the best location for their future theatres. In coming from England, they may have landed at Norfolk⁵ and sensed that, in the Virginians, they would find a good potential audience. Perhaps the actors in the Old American Company, who had played in Richmond four years before, suggested that city as a good location for a theatre. Perhaps both explanations hold true.

We have no way of ascertaining whether or not they formed the company which played in Norfolk on May 6, 1790, but we do know that on September sixteenth of that year, West and Signall petitioned the city of Richmond for the exclusive privilege of giving theatrical entertainments in that city. This petition was granted and the Mayor, the Recorder and the eldest Alderman were required to draw up a contract.⁶ Having received permission to play, West and Signall next bought Quesnay's Academy⁷ and set to work gathering a company and rehearsing

⁵ On the eighth of May, 1790, the Norfolk Chronicle advertised a presentation of The School for Scandal and the Irish Widow. We have no way of knowing what company produced these plays, but we do know that Godwin and McGrath were, at that time, playing in Fredericksburg. This could be one of the first attempts of West and Signall in America.

⁶ City of Richmond Records, September 16, 1790, microfilm.

⁷ Herald (Norfolk), February 1, 1798.

the plays which they would present there.

They had, as early as August, given the Evening Brush;⁸ but as far as we know, the first bill of plays which they gave was on October eighteenth when they presented Murphy's Know Your Own Mind and O'Keefe's opera, the Farmer. The Farmer is of particular interest because it appears to be the first American production of that opera.⁹ The printed casts for these plays give us a picture, however incomplete, of the company. Aside from the managers and their wives, this company consisted primarily of actors from the Baltimore Company of Lindsay and Wall, and later, Ryan. There was Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, who had played in Richmond in 1784 and 1787 and who, in 1788, were in Fredericksburg where they attempted, by a program of recitations, to pay their debts. There was Mr. Tobine, of the Baltimore theatre, and Mrs. Walter Davids, whose husband had died while playing in Fredericksburg the year before, with the Kenna's.¹⁰ There was also Mrs. Hyde, who had come to Richmond with Dennis Ryan in 1784 and had remained there after his departure in 1785. There was another member of the company who had come directly from the Old American Company. This was Charles Biddle who, Hallam and Henry attested, had been under articles to them and had been lured

⁸ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 328. This "Evening Brush for rubbing off the rust of care" was probably planned to test the temper of the audience to see if they, like their neighbors to the north would tolerate theatre only in disguise.

⁹ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 186

¹⁰ Virginia Gazette (Fredericksburg), October 22, 1788.

away by a member of the Virginia Company.¹¹ He had been with the Old American Company for five years after coming to America with Henry in 1786.¹² Having played in Richmond with that company in 1786, he knew the town and the theatre in which he was to play. He was the fifth member of that company to leave the Hallam and Henry group and return to Virginia.¹³ These were all good professional actors, troupers of long standing, the backbone of the company. Their numbers were augmented by poorer actors¹⁴ who, we have reasons for believing, were amateurs.¹⁵

The real strength of the company, however, lay in its managers. Thomas Wade West, according to an article which appeared in the New York Magazine, had had "near thirty years' experience in many of the first theatres in England."¹⁶ As an actor, aside from a fine voice and a knack of singing comic songs, he was doubtless inferior to Lewis

¹¹ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 327.

¹² Ibid., 331.

¹³ Mr. Lake, Kenna, J. Kenna, and Mrs. Kenna had already left the Old American Company to return south.

¹⁴ Mr. Richards, Walpole, Diddlep, and Miss Wade.

¹⁵ West and Bignall had sent letters to the papers in Virginia, regretting the imperfect state of the drama in this part of the world. Seeking to augment their forces, they offered liberal salaries to "persons of figure and education" who were inclined to make the stage their profession. Three of the actors just mentioned appeared during this season only. Miss Wade was with the company the following year, but she is not heard from after that.

¹⁶ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 167-168.

Hallen, Jr. It was the extraordinary talents he evinced as a manager that set him apart. He had, in 1790, less than nine years to live; and yet in that time, in spite of repeated setbacks which would have discouraged a lesser man, he was to build up a strong acting company, organize a circuit which provided year-around work for the actors who were dependent upon him, bring to the small towns of Virginia and South Carolina theatrical performances comparable to any on the continent. He was also to build four theatres and plan a fifth, the construction of which was postponed by his death.

His wife, Margaret Sully West,¹⁷ lacked his extraordinary talents as a manager; nevertheless she was able to keep the Virginia Company together for ten years and to build the theatre he had planned before his death. She was, furthermore, the better actor, excelling in tragic parts.

If the Wests could not be classed as great actors, the Signalls could. Both John Signall and his wife possessed the rare quality of warmth that could penetrate the house and make the audience love them. The notices they received in the press were extravagant in their praise. No criticism of their acting or their character, has yet come to light. John Signall, "the best performer on the continent,"¹⁸

¹⁷ Mrs. West was the aunt of Lawrence and Thomas Sully, the artists.

¹⁸ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 328.

had been a strolling player in England under the name of Moneypenny¹⁹ in the same company as William Warren, the manager of the Philadelphia theatre. Mrs. Bignall was called "the most distinguished ornament of the Virginia stage,"²⁰ and the "best female actress in America, not excepting Mrs. Merry."²¹ Aaron Burr, who saw her perform in Petersburg, was amazed to find her in such a small and out-of-the-way place.²² Both Bignall and his wife became immediate favorites and continued to hold the admiration of their audiences until their deaths.

Richmond audiences who had seen performances of the Old American Company (which scholars today generally credit with being the best company on the continent during its existence), as well as those of Ryan's comedians, and who could thus be expected to have some basis for comparison, were loud in their praise of West and Bignall. As early as November, 1790, these lines of applause appeared in the Independent Chronicle:

The theatre demands our praise supreme;
Ah! may my song be equal to my theme.
And hark! a second Siddons charms each heart,
Nature in her is closely link'd with art - -
The name of West should every tongue employ,
She comes to give us pain which leads to joy.

¹⁹ Samuel William Ryley, The Itinerant; or, Memories of an Actor (London, 1808), II, 321-322.

²⁰ The Enquirer, January 22, 1806.

²¹ Wyatt, "Three Petersburg Theatres," William and Mary Quarterly, 2nd ser., XXI (1941), 89.

²² Ibid., 95-96.

Nor less his merit claims the muse's art,
 Whose talents are imprinted on each heart.
 The husband's vocal power attention gain,
 Soft as the accent of Thalia's strain.

Signall (Mrs.), thy frame was meant the stage to grace;
 Easy thy mein and beautiful thy face.
 The comic muse to thee has liberal been,
 And thou canst well repay her in each scene.

Signall, like Edwin, never fails to shine,
 Great are his powers in each scenic line;
 Like him in humor gains our just applause
 And ranks the foremost in the comic cause.²³

It would have been understandable had the managers chosen to rest on laurels such as these, but they did not. There were two aims by which they governed the company for several years. These were to increase the size of the audience and to improve the caliber of the company. They must have realized at the outset that Richmond was not a large enough town to support them continuously for a long time. If Quesnay's Academy was as large as the contemporary newspaper had asserted, the entire white population of the city, who were over twenty-one, could have viewed a play at the same time. Godwin and McGrath, facing this same problem, had sought to solve it by short stays and shoddy productions in an endless succession of small towns. West and Signall were more ambitious. They aspired to a first-rate acting company and an adequate theatre in every town in which they played. Such aims were difficult to accomplish, however; and for the first year, West and Signall's company and itinerary did not seem to differ greatly from those which had preceeded it. They had begun in

²³ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 329.

August with An Evening Brush to test the temper of the Richmond audience. In September, they had requested exclusive permission to play in Richmond; and they seem to have played there throughout the month of October. For the next four months, they are lost to us. In February of 1791, they appeared in Baltimore in an "elegant and fashionable pasticcio, the Evening Brush for rubbing off the rust of care."²⁴ Their theatre was an improvised one in the New Assembly Room. Here again, then, they were proceeding cautiously, trying the temper of their audiences. This would seem to indicate that they were aware of the strenuous opposition against which actors were struggling in the northern states.²⁵

It is unfortunate that, because of the scarcity of existing records, we again lose sight of them until they arrived in Fredericksburg in August, 1791.²⁶ It is evident, however, that they had been neither disturbed nor idle during the intervening months; for the company that returned to Richmond in the fall, although strengthened and enlarged, was made up largely of the same actors who had played there the previous fall. These people, then, had earned their living

²⁴ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 162.

²⁵ Theatre was only tolerated in Philadelphia and New York; in Boston it was banned. An attempt to bring drama to the Bostonians was interrupted on December 5, 1792, when The Rivals was interrupted and the manager of the company, Mr. Harper, was arrested. Crawford, The Romance of the American Theatre, 107-114.

²⁶ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 162.

together for a year; and since no one performance could have brought in any great amount of money, nor any southern town have supported the theatre for long, it seems evident that they played many performances in several towns.

In August and September, they played in Fredericksburg;²⁷ in October, they returned to Richmond. The opening of the theatre was not announced in the papers. The first performance that we know, was that of the Foundling; or, The Successful Soldier, and the opera, Rosina, which took place on October seventeenth. Three new actors were featured on this program; Mr. Cleland and Mr. Courtner, who were both advertised as being "from London"²⁸ and Mrs. Gee, who had recently arrived from England, also. She had made her first stage appearance in Philadelphia on April ninth, at which time, Wignell, himself had introduced her in a highly complimentary prologue.²⁹ The newspapers pronounced her person agreeable, her countenance interesting, and her manner animated.³⁰ Her greatest asset, however, lay in her singing voice. It is not surprising, then, to find her in the title role of Mrs. Brooks's opera Rosina. It is surprising, however, to find an actress who had been accepted and launched by the Old American

²⁷ Virginia Herald (Fredericksburg), August 4-September 29, 1791.

²⁸ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 323.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 322.

Company and received with praise by the Philadelphia public, leaving the best company and the largest cities in the country to join West and Signall's new company, which was touring the small towns of the south. The answer probably lies in the fact that Mrs. Dee was a widow with two small children to support, and financial security meant more to her than professional advancement at this time. In addition to the possibility that West and Signall guaranteed her a better salary, there were other inducements by which they might have won her. They could have pointed out the advantages of an organized circuit, which would provide year around employment, and theatre-loving audiences who would accept the players as artists and show their appreciation for the pleasure and entertainment they would receive from the plays.

Mrs. Dee was not the only new member of the company who had been drawn from the older and more established companies that year. Mirvan Hallam and the Jenna family who had last been seen with Rodwin and McBrath in Fredericksburg, were at this time prominent in the Richmond casts.³¹ Mr. Biddle, who had left the Old American Company the preceding year, was still a member of West and Signall's company when it returned to Richmond in October. He, however, died on the twenty-seventh of November,³² depriving the company of a member it could ill

³¹ The Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, December 21, 1791; Virginia Gazette, and Weekly Advertiser, December 23, 1791; playbill owned by the Virginia State Library dated December 30, 1791.

³² Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 331.

afford to lose. He had been a good all-round actor, excelling in the parts of Scotchmen.

Even after Mr. Middle's death, West and Signall's company was a surprisingly strong one. A correspondent in the Federal Gazette claimed that it contained eight actors who were equal to anything the Old American Company had to offer.³³ Seilhamer was unable, because of the depleted and scattered state of Virginia newspapers, to unearth much information concerning the Virginia Company, considered this statement a gross exaggeration. With more information at hand, however, the probability of exaggeration seems less likely. Certainly, Mr. and Mrs. Signall were both exceptionally fine actors. Mr. and Mrs. West and Mrs. Kenna and her brother-in-law, Mr. J. Kenna,³⁴ all seem to have had both talent and training that was well above that of the average player. We are told that Mrs. Lee, who had been so well received in Philadelphia, had a pretty face and pleasing figure as well as a melodious voice; and many an actress has seen her fortune made with somewhat less than that. Of Mr. Cleland and Mr. Courtney, we know only that they were from London and were accorded Benefits. They may or may not have been numbered among the outstanding eight, remembered by the traveler from Philadelphia. Mrs. Decker, whose husband was probably the musical director, was an acceptable actress with

³³ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 331.

³⁴ Mrs. Kenna had one son, an ineffectual actor, who, when he appeared on the stage, was listed as I. Kenna. J. Kenna and T. Kenna, who often played with her, were probably her husband's brothers.

a very fine singing voice. She was young, but not being graced with Mrs. Jee's face and figure, she no doubt slipped the memory of the Philadelphia traveler.

These actors, aided by others whose names mean nothing to us today,³⁵ played in Richmond for a season lasting at least three months.³⁶ Few of the advertisements for this season have been found, but those which are extant are of particular interest. On December 16, 1791, for example, the Virginia Gazette carried a long advertisement heralding a production of Shakespeare's The Tempest as altered by Dryden, giving a long description of the stage scenery and machinery, which was surprisingly elaborate.³⁷ The opening scene, which was an addition to the Shakespearean original, is of special interest:

The opening discovers a troubled Horizon and Tempestuous Sea, where the Usurper's Vessel is tossed a considerable time in sight, and gives signal of an approaching storm, amidst repeated claps of Thunder, Lightning, Hail, Rain, &c and being dashed on a Chain of Rocks (which both sides of the stage strikingly represent) and at the same instant, a dreadful shower of fire, pouring from the distempered Elements, the crew gives signals of distress, the Waves and Winds rise to an affecting degree, and the vessel sinks in full view of the audience. The Scene altogether forming a most awful, but perfect picture of

A SHIPWRECK.

³⁵ See appendix for complete cast.

³⁶ They probably came from Fredericksburg late in September or early in October. We know that they were in Richmond on October 17th and December 30th.

³⁷ Clifford E. Rumar, in his article, "Scenery on the Early American Stage," The Theatre Annual, VII (1948-1949), 84-103, states that except for a few isolated bits of information, the record of scenery on the American stage from the end of the Revolution to 1792 is almost blank.

This hurricane (which is supposed to be raised by Magic) ceases, a delightful prospect of the Enchanted Island appears, also of the Enchanters Dwelling. Here the business of the play commences; and through the course of it (which abounds with Poetic Beauties) is represented the strange being CALIBAN, a Monster of the Isle, dressed from Nature, and agreeable to the Authors fancy of that wonderful and truly original Character.³⁸

The afterpiece which followed this extravaganza was Three Weeks After Marriage; or, What We Must All Come To.³⁹

On the twenty-first of December a performance was given, for the benefit of Mr. Cleland, of the comedy He Would Be A Soldier, and the musical entertainment The Romp; or, Love in a City.⁴⁰ Caleb and Charlotte, the leading parts in the comedy, were played by Mr. Bignall and Mrs. West. At the end of the play, there was a song by Mrs. Bignall and "by desire, ... Lash'd To The Helm" by Mr. Courtney.⁴¹ In this song, West and Bignall were following their policy of giving Virginia audiences the latest things from London; for James Hook's song was not to be published in America for another six years.⁴² In The Romp, John Bignall played one of his favorite parts, that of Wattey Cockney. He also ended the evening's entertainment with the recitation "Paddy

³⁸ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, December 18, 1791.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., December 21, 1791.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sigmund Spaeth, A History of Popular Music in America (New York, 1948), 62-63.

Bull's Expedition."⁴³ Thus, from the time the curtain rose at six-thirty in the evening until its final lowering at nine-thirty or ten, John Bignall dominated the stage. The inference to be drawn from this was not that Bignall kept for himself all the best parts; for it must be remembered, this was Mr. Cleland's Benefit, and the choice of the plays, the casting of them, and the proceeds of the evening were all his. Mr. Cleland undoubtedly felt that he could draw a much larger audience, and correspondingly greater financial returns, by advertising Mr. Bignall in the leading parts, than by playing these parts himself.

For Mr. Courtney's Benefit, played on the twenty-third of December, John Bignall acted Young Marlow; but top billing was given Mr. Kenna, who played the part of Tony Lumpkin, "with songs."⁴⁴ This latter was, no doubt, type-casting, and as such, may have been quite satisfactory. Mr. Kenna was certainly not an inspired actor; but coming from a theatrical family, he was no doubt an adequate one; and no doubt this "guzzler of beef fat" felt very much at home in the part of the idle, cunning lout which Goldsmith had drawn.

Mrs. Bignall and Mr. Courtney sang between the play and the opera. Mr. Courtney's song was "of Major Andre's Lamentation, in character."⁴⁵ This appears to be the first of many songs and plays

⁴³ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, December 21, 1791.

⁴⁴ Ibid., December 23, 1791.

⁴⁵ Virginia Gazette, and Weekly Advertiser, December 23, 1791.

which concerned themselves with the fate of the unfortunate British officer who had received the plans of West Point from Benedict Arnold and was executed as a spy.

The musical entertainment that followed was also new. It was a comic opera by Bates, called The Rival Candidates; or, The Borough Election.⁴⁶ Having received great applause at Drury Lane, it was first produced in this country by the Old American Company on the thirteenth of June in 1791.⁴⁷ On the sixteenth of the same month, it was repeated for Mrs. Lee's benefit; and it was no doubt she, who brought the script to Virginia when she came south in August to join West and Signall at Fredericksburg.

The last play of the season, of which we have a record, was Isabella,⁴⁸ in which Mrs. West played the title role. The tragic part of Isabella, which she had played in Fredericksburg in August,⁴⁹ remained a favorite with her; and she continued to play it until her death, twenty years later.

As the curtain fell on this last performance of the year, West and Signall might well have taken stock of their accomplishments, and

⁴⁶ Virginia Gazette, and Weekly Advertiser, December 23, 1791.

⁴⁷ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 321-22.

⁴⁸ Playbill for December 30, 1791, in the Virginia State Library.

⁴⁹ Virginia Herald (Fredericksburg), August 26, 1791.

have congratulated themselves on what they saw. In the last year and a half (1790-91), they had turned their backs on Hallam and Henry and brought their families south. They had built up a large and very creditable acting company; and somewhere they had found the money, after paying for the passage from Europe of their large families,⁵⁰ to purchase Quesnay's Academy for a theatre. Now they owned one theatre; many more were to follow. They now had, beside the usual stock scenery, foliage, interior, and street scene, at least one elaborate set of "scenes and machines"⁵¹ and many more would be added to it in the years to come.

⁵⁰ Norfolk Herald, February 1, 1798.

⁵¹ This same set of scenery was used by West and Signall in Charleston in 1793. Wesley Swanson in his "Wings and Backdrops. The Story of American Stage Scenery from the Beginnings to 1875," Drama, XVIII (October, 1927-January, 1928), 41, notes it as being one of the first examples of such elaborate mechanical, actor-excluding scenery in America.

CHAPTER V

A Theatre Family: The Sullys

The Virginia Company and the San Domingan Refugees

The Death of John Signall

CHAPTER V

In Thomas Wade West, the eager but scattered audience of the South found a manager of exceptional skill and high standards of production. His two principal aims, both of which became apparent in 1792, were to improve the calibre of his acting company and to provide more adequate stages upon which this company might act. In accordance with these aims he built his first playhouse in Charleston.¹ It was one hundred and twenty-five feet long, fifty-six feet wide, and thirty-seven feet high. A communication concerning it, dated August 18, 1792, appeared in the New York Magazine of September:

The theatre is to be built under the immediate direction of Mr. West. When it is considered that the gentleman has had near thirty years experience in many of the first theatres of England, that he is to be assisted by artists of the first class, Captain Toomer and Mr. Mahan, we may expect a theatre in the style of elegance and novelty.²

West and Bignall made progress toward their second aim, the improvement of the calibre of their acting company, in 1792 also. They could only have considered the soliciting of "persons of figure and education" who were "inclined to make the stage their profession"³ a temporary expedient; for the best actors were almost invariably bred to the stage. The dependable actor, who went to make up the backbone of

¹ West and Bignall had bought Quesnay's Academy, but this theatre was the first that they built.

² Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 167-68.

³ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, 11, 329.

any acting company, was he who, in addition to his natural talents, possessed a store of theatrical tricks and knew how and when to use them. Having grown up on the stage, he knew all the parts of the most popular plays and could fill in any part at a moment's notice.⁴ In the give and take among actors on the stage, he knew how to hold his own. He knew all the tricks by which one actor might help or hinder another. He knew how to "cover" for a fellow actor whose memory had failed him. He also knew how to upstage his colleague, making him turn his back to the audience at the moment when he might have been the center of attraction. He knew how to draw attention from the speaker by unheard action and how to give the wrong cue or change the timing or the "business" of the scene to the detriment of another actor. He could gauge his audience and subtly change his performance to suit it. Such an actor had, also, an invaluable stock of recitations, songs, imitations, tricks, or dances from which he could draw entr'acte entertainment.

For West and Bignall, there were only two sources from which they could draw this type of actor: from the existing troupes in the United States (and there had already been some unpleasantness occasioned by the use of this source)⁵ and from abroad. Occasionally

⁴ In an untitled article in The Thespian Mirror (Philadelphia), 1805-1806, 7, there is an account of Charles Young's taking over the leading role in the Mountaineers on a half-hour's notice.

⁵ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 330.

actors came to America, as West and Signall themselves had done, of their own volition and applied to a manager for a place in his company; but the Virginia, or South Carolina, company was not sufficiently well known at this time to draw such actors. Nor did it have the reputation and money to tempt players of acknowledged excellence from the London stage. Two classes of actors remained from which the managers might obtain recruits, the "unrecognized" comedians from the provinces and the oftentimes excellent actor whose position in one of the best companies of England, Scotland, Ireland, or France was menaced by the presence of a famous star who was always accorded the parts to which he or she aspired, or who was hampered by public disfavor or disgrace, deserved or not, and who was therefore willing to emigrate.

It was usually necessary to make a protracted trip to Europe to recruit from either of these classes, to select personally promising material from the provinces or to tempt and persuade the dissatisfied actor; but a trip across the Atlantic was, at that time, both expensive and time-consuming. West and Signall probably used another method; that of writing to a fellow actor abroad, previously known, persuading him to come to this country and to bring other actors willing to make the long trip and whom he could recommend. This would seem to be the way that Matthew Sully, Senior, and family, were brought to this country.

Matthew Sully, Senior, was Margaret West's brother. He had spent a life time in the theatre in Dublin, Edinburgh, London, Paris,

and many more places of less importance⁶ as a singer, tumbler, Harlequin, and clown. He had entertained between the play and the farce at Sadler's Wells with tumbling acts and comic songs⁷ and had been, more recently, with the Royal Circus in Edinburgh.⁸ He was, indeed, a circus performer, but the eighteenth century circus had nothing to do with lions and tigers, calliopes or trained seals. Primarily an equestrian show, it was compounded of short farces and pantomimes, excellent horsemanship, and surprising feats of activity and tumbling. It was not, then, as extraordinary as it might at first appear, to find West and Bignall bringing a circus performer across the Atlantic to play in the farces, pantomimes, and entr'acte entertainments of their theatre.

Sully was not an exceptional actor, but he was a trouper with twenty-five or thirty years experience on the stage and he was thus the type of player most needed in Virginia at that time. His greatest asset, however, was his family. His wife, Sarah Chester Sully, was a player whose musical talents made her a valuable addition to any company and whose years of experience made her at home on any stage. Their nine children, all of them unusually handsome,⁹ had been born to

⁶ Norfolk Herald, April 2, 1801

⁷ Isaac John Greenwood, The Circus, It's Origin and Growth Prior to 1835 (New York: The Dunlap Society, 1898), 71.

⁸ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, July 26, 1792.

⁹ Edward Biddle and Fielding Mantle, The Life and Works of Thomas Sully (Philadelphia, 1921).

the stage and, to a large extent, raised in it. At least three of the children, Matthew, Junior, Charlotte, and Elizabeth had appeared in the theatres of Edinburgh¹⁰ or Dublin.¹¹

Thus it was that, by persuading his brother-in-law to join him in Virginia, Thomas Wade West added eleven comedians to his company. It seems likely, also that it was Matthew Sully who procured for the company Mr. Hamilton "from the Theatre Royal, Dublin"¹² who made his first appearance in Richmond during the summer of 1792. In addition to these new members, the company, which opened their Richmond season on the twenty-fifth of July with O'Keefe's Wild Oats; or, The Strolling Gentleman, still included almost all of the actors who had played in Richmond the preceeding fall. Mr. Cleland, "from London," and the completely unknown Mr. Reilly are the only two actors missing.

Those Sullys whose names appeared on the casts for that season were, Matthew, Senior and his wife, Lawrence, Matthew, Charlotte, and Elizabeth. Lawrence, the oldest son, was an artist, a miniature and device painter by profession, who was to live for the remainder of his life in Richmond and Norfolk. He showed little interest or aptitude for the theatre; and on the few occasions when he appeared on the stage, he was given second billing to his younger brother Matthew, Junior.

¹⁰ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, July 25, 1792.

¹¹ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 191.

¹² Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, July 25, 1792.

Matthew Sully, Junior, billed in the Richmond paper as being from "the Royal Circus, Edinburgh,"¹³ was the most promising actor of the family. He had recently married Elizabeth Robertson,¹⁴ a Virginian,¹⁵ whose musical ability was sufficient to warrant her giving concerts to augment her husband's income when it was low¹⁶ or to support her son after her husband's death.¹⁷

Charlotte Sully, the oldest of five girls, was soon to be married to Mr. Chambers, an English actor from the Theatre-Royal, Haymarket, who came to America in 1792 also, making his debut at the Southwark in Philadelphia.¹⁸ With him, she was to play in Richmond, Charleston, Norfolk, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston before leaving with him for Antigua in 1800,¹⁹ where they apparently remained.

The sixth member of the family to appear on the stage in Rich-

¹³ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, July 25, 1792.

¹⁴ The marriage evidently took place between the arrival of the Sullys in America and the concert given by Mrs. M. Sully, Jr., in Richmond in September.

¹⁵ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 190.

¹⁶ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, September 5, 1792, carries an announcement of a concert by Mrs. M. Sully. This was at a time, shortly after Matthew Sully, Jr.'s arrival in this country and shortly after his marriage -- a time when he might well have been in need of extra money.

¹⁷ Mrs. M. Sully, Jr., again gave a concert in 1819.

¹⁸ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 190.

¹⁹ Norfolk Herald, April 25, 1801.



PLATE 4

**MATTHEW SULLY, SENIOR, FROM A MINIATURE
BY HIS SON, THOMAS SULLY**

mond, in the fall of 1792, was Elizabeth. She was the most beautiful²⁰ of an exceedingly handsome family.²¹ Like her sisters, she had been educated in Dublin; and she had appeared there at the Theatre-Royal, dancing the "Celebrated Juvenile Horn-pipe" for "upwards of thirty nights."²²

The casts of this season also included Mr. J. Bignall, who was probably the Mr. Bignall, Jr. of the preceding year²³ and Mr. T. West, who was probably Thomas Wade West, Jr. and the Master West of the 1791 casts.²⁴ The Virginia Company was becoming a family affair, with the managers and their families accounting for thirteen of the actors who played on the Richmond stage that season.²⁵

Of the season's productions, the most interesting is that of September fifth. The advertisement of this date was the first to be placed in the newspaper by the Virginia Company, excepting the two

²⁰ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 191.

²¹ Edward Biddle and Fielding Mantle, The Life and Works of Thomas Sully.

²² Willis, The Charleston Stage, 191.

²³ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, December 21, 1791.

²⁴ Virginia Herald (Fredericksburg), August 18, 1791.

²⁵ Mr. and Mrs. Bignall; J. Bignall, Jr.; Mr. and Mrs. West; T. West; Mr. and Mrs. Sully; Lawrence and Matthew, Jr. and his wife Elizabeth Robertson Sully; Elizabeth and Charlotte Sully. There were still other members of the families who would appear later: James West, Harriet West, W. West, Mrs. T. West, Isaac Bignall, Thomas Sully, Chester Sully, Harriet and Julia Sully.

notices which heralded the opening of the season. The program for this evening opened with the tragedy Sorrows of Werter; or, the Disconsolate Lover, for which were provided "Scenes Brought up with commanding force."²⁶ The managers recommended this tragedy to the Richmond audience in their notice, recommending that:

. . . all unite to recommend Werter to public notice; while the dreadful light in which self-murder is held to view, gives a salutary lesson to desponding misery, and bids it patiently wait HIS dispensations WHO never afflicts but with a design to heal and only punishes to save.²⁷

This recommendation is characteristic of the age. At a time when there was much criticism of the stage, especially when any of the vices were displayed upon it,²⁸ actors, managers, and theatre lovers countered with the argument that the theatre was not morally degenerative; that it was instead, instructive. From viewing a tragedy, they insisted, the spectator learned the wages of vice, the rewards of virtue, and the uses of adversity.²⁹ That a play might offer an evening's entertainment--and no more--was never publicly suggested.

Werter's companion piece on this fifth of September was David

²⁶ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, September 5, 1792.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ It is difficult to find signs of opposition to the theatre in the south at this time; but it was strong enough in the northern states to impede the growth of theatre there.

²⁹ Examples of this kind of defense are to be found in Thespian Oracle, vii, viii, 2, and in a quotation from Republican (Petersburg, Va.), April 30, 1807 reprinted in William and Mary Quarterly, 2d ser., XXI (1941), 97.

Garrick's musical entertainment Shakespeare's Jubilee. First produced at Stratford in 1769,³⁰ it was later brought to London where it was performed "upwards of one hundred nights."³¹

There were also presented in September, two musical events of interest. They were a concert, given by Mrs. M. Sully,³² and a "Musical Performance"³³ at the Eagle Tavern, "the whole composed by Mr. Taylor, music professor, lately arrived from England."³⁴ This program, competing with the Virginia Company for Richmond audiences, consisted of an interlude called the Constant Lass; or, the Sailor's Frolic, songs and dialogues, and a Burletta in one act, called The Quack; or, The Doctor in Petticoats -- all of which was accomplished by Mr. Raynor Taylor and "his pupil, Miss Huntley, late of the Theatre-Royal, Covent Garden."³⁵ The Dialogue consisted of dialogue, duets, and songs. The Burletta was a light musical piece, probably burlesque in nature, without a word of spoken dialogue. Burlettas, in general, were a combination of dumb show and song, with pieces of cloth, bearing inscriptions, hung around the stage to make the whole more intelligi-

³⁰ Thomas Davies, Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick, Esq. (Boston, 1818), II, 158.

³¹ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 179.

³² Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, September 8, 1792.

³³ Ibid., September 12, 1792.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

ble.³⁶ This type of entertainment obviously could not rival the productions of the Virginia Company. Paynor Taylor seems to have realized this; for soon after the entertainment at the Eagle Tavern, he and his pupil, Miss Huntley, moved to Annapolis. There, in October, he was appointed organist for Saint Anne's Church.³⁷ What income he received from this post, he augmented by teaching music and by presenting occasional "Olios" with the aid of his pupil.³⁸

On the first of October, another performance of the Virginia Company was advertised in the Gazette. The plays on the program were Such Things Are; or, the Christian Sultan and Days and Means; or, A Trip to Dover, by George Colman, the Younger. This bill was concluded with "surprising feats of activity in lofty tumbling by Mr. Sully, Jr. (who was justly the admiration of Britian) assisted by Master Sully."³⁹ The clown was Mr. Sully, Sr. With the entrance of Master Sully, who was either the nine year old Thomas⁴⁰ or his brother Chester, the residents of Richmond saw the eighth member of the Sully family play upon their boards in one season.

There is a generally accepted bit of misinformation concerning

³⁶ Ernest Bradley Watson, From Sheridan to Robertson (Cambridge, 1926), 28.

³⁷ Sonneck, Early Concert Life in America, 41-43.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, October 1, 1792.

⁴⁰ Thomas Sully was born in 1783.

the Sullys which asserts that they came from England to Charleston, South Carolina and made their home there.⁴¹ We know that they had played in Richmond for five months before going south, and that Charleston was but one stop in the theatrical circuit of West and Bignall's company to which they were attached. It is interesting to note, also, that while Charlotte and Elizabeth accompanied their aunt and uncle on their trip south in the early days of 1793 and played with them in the new Charleston theatre, the rest of the Sully family remained in Richmond.

It was after the completion of the benefit performances in December, that the majority of the actors of the Virginia Company set sail for Charleston in the brig Two Sisters.⁴² Mr. West had gone on ahead to make all the necessary arrangements concerning the new theatre. It is possible that Mr. Hamilton accompanied him; for his name appears on both the Richmond and the Charleston casts but is not on the list of passengers aboard the brig. The passenger list did not include eight of the actors who had been with West and Bignall in the fall of 1792.⁴³ Seven of these missing ones were to be with the company again in Rich-

⁴¹ Willis, The Charleston Stage; Dictionary of American Biography; Dunlap, History of Arts and Designs; Biddle and Mantle, Life and Works of Thomas Sully.

⁴² Willis, The Charleston Stage, 154.

⁴³ Mr. and Mrs. Sully, Matthew Sully, Lawrence Sully, Thomas Sully, Mirvan Ballam, J. Kenna, Mrs. Kenna.

mond in the fall of 1793.⁴⁴ Had the company, then, been split up and a part of it left in Virginia to play the smaller towns? We know only that, on the twenty-fourth of April, the Sullys who had remained in Virginia, gave an entertainment at the Eagle Tavern which consisted of "surprising feats in lofty tumbling with music on the harpsichord."⁴⁵ For particulars, we are asked to see the bills of the day, which are, unfortunately, lost to us now; but if this entertainment resembled the one they gave eight months later,⁴⁶ it included "feats" by Lawrence, Matthew, Thomas, and Chester Sully, with their father acting as clown and their mother, or perhaps Matthew's wife, at the harpsichord.

In the meantime, the Charleston season had opened on February eleventh.⁴⁷ On the sixth of March, a new member of the company made his first appearance on the Charleston stage. He was Mr. Chambers, an English actor who had come to America in 1792, making his first appearance in this country at the Southwark theatre in Philadelphia. We can not help but wonder if he had known the Sullys in Europe and if they were in any way responsible for his joining the company at this time; for on the thirtieth of May, he and Charlotte Sully were married.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Only Mrs. Kenna of this list is missing in the casts of 1793.

⁴⁵ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, April 24, 1793.

⁴⁶ Virginia Gazette, and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser, December 12, 1793.

⁴⁷ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 178.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 180.

The Charleston season closed with Mrs. West's benefit on the thirty-first of May. This last program consisted of Romeo and Juliet, with Mrs. West as Juliet, and the musical entertainment Shakespeare's Jubilee. Three days later, the company sailed in the ship Swift Packet for Norfolk, Virginia.⁴⁹ It is impossible to estimate, without knowing what winds carried or buffeted her, how long the Swift Packet was at sea before tying to one of the extremely narrow docks that bordered the harbor at Norfolk. These docks faced the open square, which was a long one and quite deep, with its taverns and shops along two sides. All the way across the upper end of the square was the market, which was open every day in the week, excluding Sunday when it closed at nine o'clock in the morning.⁵⁰ There were two wide streets in Norfolk, which were set at right angles to one another. The rest were laid out in a helter-skelter arrangement. Some were paved, and they were dusty or muddy, depending upon the weather. On either side of the streets were open sewage ditches crossed by "little narrow bridges made of short lengths of plank nailed on cross pieces."⁵¹ Most of the houses were of wood and only one story high. There were, however, many large barns, carefully protected by lightning rods. There were some five hundred houses which were, except in the upper part of town, set close

⁴⁹ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 181.

⁵⁰ Moreau de Saint Méry, Nederic Louis Elie, American Journey, 1793-1798, translated and edited by Kenneth Roberts and Anna M. Roberts (New York, 1947), 46.

⁵¹ Ibid.

together. Among these new houses, the charred ruins of the fires of the Revolution still stood.⁵² The theatre, according to Wertenbaker, was not a regular playhouse, but a wooden warehouse on Calvert's Lane used as a theatre.⁵³ Moreau de St. Mery, however, speaks of a brick theatre.⁵⁴

The population of Norfolk, which was the theatre's potential audience, was surprisingly different from that of its near neighbor, Richmond. Richmond audiences took their tone from the legislature and the planters who came from the surrounding countryside. Norfolk, on the other hand, had proportionately few rich planters; and its county court had a negligible effect upon the audiences when compared to that of the state legislature. Norfolk's peculiar character derived from the fact that it was Virginia's foremost port. The "Arrivals and Clearances" which were published in the newspapers, listed such places as Gibraltar, Liverpool, Philadelphia, North Carolina, Saint Eustatia, Baltimore, Antigua, Cork, Saint Bartholomew, Whitehaven, Haver-de-Grace, Port au Prince, Barbados, Saint Kitts, Glasgow, Madeira, and Morlaix.⁵⁵ To the Antilles, these ships carried lumber, barrel staves,

⁵² Moreau de Saint Méry, American Journey, 61.

⁵³ Thomas J. Wertenbaker, Norfolk, Historic Southern Port (Durham, 1931), 129.

⁵⁴ Moreau de Saint Méry, American Journey, 61.

⁵⁵ Virginia Gazette, and Weekly Advertiser, October 4, 1787, November 1, 1787, June 28, 1788.

shingles, flour, cattle, corn, and potatoes; and from France, London, Liverpool, and Glasgow, they returned with "ribbons, laces, black, white and colored gloves, Bonnet frames," "a billiard table," an "elegant Phaeton and Harness"⁵⁶ and books, music, and musical instruments. The Norfolk audience, then, took its tone from the rich merchants, ship builders, sea captains, sailors and their doxies, and the women of doubtful character from Water Street.

The Virginia Company had not been playing there long when this busy, overcrowded little town was thrown into a state of excitement and pleasurable turmoil by the arrival of one hundred and thirteen sailing vessels, each crowded to the sinking point⁵⁷ with Haitian refugees fleeing from the burning town of Le Cap on the war-torn island of St. Domingo.⁵⁸ Sometime between the twenty-third of June, when these people fled the holocaust,⁵⁹ and the tenth of July when their arrival at Norfolk was recorded in the local newspaper, their ships sailed into Hampton Roads.⁶⁰ They were a motley crowd: some were the officers and men of the French army and navy sent to put down the uprising of free negroes and slaves of St. Domingo; some were the shopkeepers,

⁵⁶ Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle, August 14, 1790.

⁵⁷ Ralph Korngold, Citizen Toussaint (Boston, 1944), 93.

⁵⁸ Antoine Métral, Histoire de L'expédition des Français (Paris, 1925), 41.

⁵⁹ Korngold, Citizen Toussaint, 91.

⁶⁰ Moreau de St. Méry, American Journey, 80.

actors, musicians, civil servants, and town officials of Le Cap and their families; some were the planters and their wives and kin from the Haitian countryside. Excepting only a few of the military personnel, who had looted the burning city, they were all destitute. Moved by the plight of these refugees from a servile revolution, Virginians volunteered funds for their relief. Subscriptions poured in from Norfolk, Richmond, Petersburg, York, Hampton, Portsmouth, and Williamsburg; the last three mentioned towns alone contributing \$1,075.00.⁶¹

It is unfortunate that we know so little about the impact these people had upon the residents of Norfolk, whom they probably outnumbered.⁶² Their effect upon the theatre is more evident. One example is the production of Monsigny's Deserter, a French opera which the Virginia Company gave in English that summer.⁶³ Another is the number of Frenchmen who joined West and Signall in various capacities at this time. We know there had been a theatre at Cap Francois.⁶⁴ We know that West and Signall hired at least three of the refugees (and it

⁶¹ Moreau de St. Méry, American Journey, 50.

⁶² Métral places the number at "deux mille blancs avec leurs femmes et leurs enfans." Korngold says that "more than a hundred vessels [113 landed at Norfolk] packed with ten thousand refugees, lifted anchor and set sail for the United States." The population of Norfolk was three thousand.

⁶³ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 189; Early Concert Life in America, 217

⁶⁴ Métral, Histoire de l'expédition des Français, 177; John F. Vandercook, Black Majesty (New York, 1928).

seems probable that there were several more) as musicians in the theatre orchestra.⁶⁵ These are the only additions from the refugees to the company for whom we have proof, however, there were added at this time a number of people with French names to the company: M. Audin and his son who was soon to be billed as M. Audin, Jr., Mr. Gornet, and Monsieur and Madame Douvillier.

In August, while the Virginia Company was still playing in Norfolk, Mr. West went to Richmond to make arrangements for the coming season.⁶⁶ What he found when he opened the old theatre of Quesnay's Academy, which he and John Signall had bought and on which they were still making payments, must have been discouraging. Someone had broken into the theatre, and many of the properties had been stolen. The theatre itself had been damaged. He placed a notice in the paper to the effect that twenty pounds reward would be given for "information sufficient to bring the depredators to punishment."⁶⁷ This advertisement ran in five consecutive numbers of the newspaper, and was finally followed on the twenty-eighth of August by the notice:

⁶⁵ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 210-211.

⁶⁶ Mr. West seems to have been the real manager of the Virginia Company. It was he who took over the building of theatres and the necessary arrangements for the moving of the company. Mr. Signall was the leading actor and shareholder. The apparent lack of conflict between the managers probably stems from Mr. West's talents as a manager and his partner's willingness to leave the management to him.

⁶⁷ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, August 7, 1793.

Theatre

Twenty Pounds Reward !

Whereas some persons, maliciously inclined, have frequently broken open and feloniously taken from the theatre on Shockoe Hill upwards of 400 yards of printed canvass, one mahogany dressing table, six chairs, a pair of brass knockers from the stage doors, one pair of cast iron kitchen dogs, three sets of fire irons, and several other articles not yet recollected, and otherwise, through wanton wickedness, much damaged the house.

West and Signall⁶⁸

The Richmond season opened on October twenty-fourth with the comedy Young Quaker and the comic opera Flitch of Bacon.⁶⁹ A number of new names appear in the casts, including Mr. Chambers and his wife, who had played the preceeding year as Miss Sully, and Mr. and Mrs. Edgar. Of Mrs. Edgar, we know very little; her husband we know from the trouble he caused.⁷⁰ He was a "drunkard with a disputatious nature"⁷¹ and the ambition, if not the talent, to become a theatre manager. He must have been a good actor; otherwise Mr. West would never have endured him. There was also Mr. and Mrs. Kedy, who had first appeared in the spring when the company was playing in Charleston, and a Mr. I. Signall, who was probably the Isaac Signall who later married

⁶⁸ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, August 28, 1793.

⁶⁹ Virginia Gazette, and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser, October 24, 1793.

⁷⁰ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 264-265, 270, 385, 391.

⁷¹ Hervey Allen, Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allen Poe (New York, 1934), 6.

Harriet West.⁷²

The first program of any particular interest was that given on October twenty-eighth. A Day in Turkey and the comic opera Quaker⁷³ are of interest because mention is made not only of the scenery but of the man who painted it. Scenery had been mentioned in the advertisements of the preceeding fall, but it had probably been painted by an actor of the company. Now the company boasted a professional artist hired for the expresse purpose of creating the scenes and machines for the elaborate productions to which the managers aspired. Three times during the season, credit is given to M. Audin, the French scene-painter for creating all new scenes for the evening's plays.⁷⁴ He was aided by his son who was also a painter.⁷⁵

Several new people joined the company during the season. Mr. and Mrs. Henderson, from England, and making their first appearance in America,⁷⁶ and Mr. Clifford, an actor and singer from the Bath Theatre, were featured on November seventh. On this particular night, the song

⁷² George Holbert Tucker, Abstracts from Norfolk City Marriage Bonds (Norfolk, 1934), 4.

⁷³ Virginia Gazette, and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser, October 28, 1793.

⁷⁴ October 28, 1793; November 7, 1793; December 12, 1793.

⁷⁵ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, III, 285.

⁷⁶ Virginia Gazette, and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser, November 7, 1793.

which Mr. Clifford sang between the comic opera The Haunted Tower and the farce Love-A-La-Mode was called "Washington's Council Forever, Buzza."⁷⁷ This song was Mr. Clifford's own composition.⁷⁸

Mr. and Mrs. Marriott, whose names appeared first in the casts for December fifth,⁷⁹ were accorded a benefit on the twelfth of December, 1793.⁸⁰ The program they chose was an interesting one. They offered the tragedy The Orphan; or, the Unhappy Marriage in which Mrs. Marriott played the part of Monimia.⁸¹ It must have been a success, for she played the same part in Charleston six weeks later. At that time, the Gazette published the following comment on the reaction of the audience:

When poor Monimia weeps and raves, a sigh
Bursts from each breast and tears at every eye.⁸²

The Orphan was followed by the farce High Life Below Stairs, a mock

⁷⁷ Virginia Gazette, and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser, November 7, 1793.

⁷⁸ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 197.

⁷⁹ Virginia Gazette, and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser, December 5, 1793.

⁸⁰ Seilhamer claims that the Marriotts appeared first in Philadelphia in September of 1794, and Willis insists that they appeared in Charleston eight months before this date. We know now that they played in Richmond in December of 1793, and it is possible that they played in Norfolk during the preceding summer.

⁸¹ Virginia Gazette, and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser, December 12, 1793.

⁸² Willis, The Charleston Stage, 194.

minuet by Mr. Edgar and Mr. Hallam --"the whole to conclude with surprising feats of activity" by Mr. M. Sully, Mr. L. Sully, Master T. Sully, and Master C. Sully.⁸³

For Mrs. West's benefit on the sixteenth, Matthew Sully, Jr., who was the most talented and versatile actor of the four brothers, was again prominent. The bill for the evening announced, in addition to the Jealous Wife and songs by Mr. Clifford and Mr. Henderson, "a Grand Serious Pantomime," directed by M. Sully, called The Death of Captain Cook --"the whole to conclude with the awful representation of a burning mountain."⁸⁴ To direct a pantomime in the eighteenth century was to be its author, although it was very likely that none of it was ever written down. In this case, Matthew Sully doubtless conceived the idea of the piece as a whole, invented the tricks (including the burning mountain) and choreographed the dances and marches. The result must have been quite satisfactory; for the production was repeated twice in Charleston the following spring.

Lawrence Sully, although he received second billing when playing with his younger brother, had a talent of his own. He had already set himself up as a miniature and device painter in Richmond. When, on the thirtieth of December, he married Sally Innis, the newspaper placed

⁸³ Virginia Gazette, and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser, December 12, 1793.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

them as being "both from this city."⁸⁵ After less than eighteen months residence, he was already claimed as a Richmonder--and one whose importance was sufficient to render his marriage newsworthy.

At the time of the wedding, a part of the company had departed for Charleston. If Mr. and Mrs. Sully; Mr. and Mrs. Chambers; and Matthew, Thomas, Chester, Elizabeth, and Julia Sully stayed in Richmond until after the wedding, it would account for the fact that "a part of West and Bignall's company"⁸⁶ arrived late in Charleston. The Charleston season, which opened on the twenty-second of January with The Earl of Essex and the comic opera The Farmer, into which Clifford's song "Washington's Council Forever, Huzza!"⁸⁷ was introduced, was to be a long and arduous one. West and Bignall doubtless took the seeds of their troubles in the members of the St. Domingo company with them when they went south. Artists of the theatre are notoriously individualistic and temperamental, and to weld together a group of such artists from Scotland, Ireland, England, and France was a difficult task indeed. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the French were further divided between those from St. Domingo and those who had come to America directly from Europe.

West and Bignall seem to have been exceedingly generous with the

⁸⁵ Virginia Gazette, and Weekly Advertiser, January 3, 1794.

⁸⁶ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 192.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 192-193.

French- even to the point of their own undoing. On the sixth of March, the managers turned over their theatre to the St. Cecilia Society for a benefit performance for the St. Domingans, and the performance was largely by the members of their own company. There were songs by Mr. West, Mr. Chambers, Mr. Clifford, and Mrs. Chambers; a sonata on the pianoforte by Mrs. Sully; a violin concerto by Mr. Petit. M. Francisque and M. Dainville and M. and Mme Val gave a grand ballet, and the entertainment ended with "manly feats of activity by Mr. M. Sully."⁸⁸

On the other hand, West and Bignall had good reason to be tired of Frenchmen before the season was over. On Wednesday, March nineteenth:

two French seamen, who appeared to be intoxicated, attended the theatre, and behaving in a rude and indecent manner, were turned out by force of the audience. This instance exciting indignation in them they returned to their comrades, who, by their representations were induced to believe that they had been grossly insulted. In consequence of which, about thirty, with drawn swords, repaired to the theatre, rushed in and excited general terror and confusion by a furious and indiscriminate attack on the audience, who immediately fled in all directions! A part of the city guard attempting to quell the rioters were overpowered (three of whom were wounded) and giving way alarmed the citizens by ringing bells and beating to arms, who, with their usual alertness, assembled at their respective alarm-posts, and by proper exertions apprehended several of the rioters and restored tranquility to the city. The rioters were yesterday tried by the City Council, who fined some of them and bound others over to keep the peace.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 202-203.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 205.

A week later, the newspaper heralded the opening of a French Theatre, with John Joseph Leger Sollee as proprietor and Alexander Placide as manager.⁹⁰ Their first performance was for the benefit of their unfortunate brethren, "the American prisoners in Algiers."⁹¹ West and Signall countered with an earlier benefit in their theatre for the "American Captives in Algiers," contributing £256 2s. 6d.⁹² On April tenth, M. Lecat, Brunet, and Daguetty, musicians in West and Signall's company, applied "as distressed citizens of St. Domingo"⁹³ for permission to play in the French Theatre. Such permission was necessary since their articles forbade them from playing as musicians in any other company. The letter was long and petulant, seeking to discredit West and Signall, and making a public plea for sympathy. The next morning's paper brought an answer to their letter. After an apology to the public for intruding upon them, West and Signall explained their reluctance in permitting their musicians to play for M. Placide:

The variety of the musical pieces which are incumbent upon us to present to liberal audiences, renders frequent rehearsals indispensable, and we are determined to spare neither expense nor trouble in giving every polish to the pieces we exhibit which our exertions will enable us to accomplish; it necessarily follows that a relaxation from the duty to our patrons in these engaged in their service is inadmissible. However, as an assistance to, or employ-

⁹⁰ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 256.

⁹¹ Ibid., 208.

⁹² Ibid., 209.

⁹³ Ibid., 210-11

ment of the gentlemen who have appeared with so much publicity in your paper, seems no longer useful to them, they are free to pursue that line they conceive best adapted to their interest; we can dispense with their services, and on our parts are willing to cancel every tie under which they stand engaged to the public's obliged and devoted servants,

West and Signall ⁹⁴

Lecat, Brunet, and Daguetty were not the only ones who published their petty grievances in the newspaper and publicly went over to the French Theatre. M. Placide welcomed these disaffected elements with open arms. Mr. and Mrs. Marriott, M. Audin and his son, and five members of the Sully family had gone over to the French Theatre by the middle of May.⁹⁵ The competition was intense, with each theatre group publishing longer and longer advertisements of more and more elaborate productions. West and Signall were forced to lower the price of admission⁹⁶ and sell additional shares in the Charleston Theatre.⁹⁷ Their magnanimity and total lack of bitterness, however, won out in the end. On the twentieth of September, the following notice appeared in the paper:

BY AUTHORITY
CHARLESTON THEATRE

The French players, being engaged for the ensuing season by Messrs West and Signall, and Mr. West having granted them the use of this theatre for one night's performance for their benefit before the opening of the same, they propose performing

⁹⁴ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 211-12.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 245.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 213.

This evening the 20th inst.
A Lyric Drama (with its original overture), called
"Tryame and Thisto."⁹⁸

This was followed by descriptions of the entertainment to be offered and casts which were made up entirely of members of the French company.

This season then, which had been fraught with so many worries and so much unpleasantness, would seem to have ended in a heart-warming victory for West and Bignall; but, on the eleventh of August, the company suffered an irreparable blow. John Bignall died. Unquestionably the best actor in the company, he was not only admired for the superior quality of his work, but was genuinely loved by the audiences who saw him. There were many tributes to his memory published, and all mention his kind heart and noble generosity.⁹⁹ The following letter from the Orphan House is characteristic of the feeling that the people of Charleston had for him. West and Bignall had given two benefits for the Orphans, and the tone of this letter is warmer than might be expected from appreciation for a donation:

Orphan House, August 12, 1794.

Sir:- -

The Commissioners of the Orphan House keenly regretting the early fate of Mr. Bignall, beg leave to condone most sincerely with Mrs. Bignall and the rest of the family upon the mournful event, and desirous of paying the last tribute of respect to the memory of a man they so highly esteemed, have unanimously resolved to attend his funeral and to carry in the procession all the children now upon the establishment. These children will long carry in their minds a grateful remembrance of the services they have

⁹⁸ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 253.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 227.

received at the hands of their departed and much lamented friend,
and benefactor.

I am with great respect, Sir,
Your most obedient servant,
Charles Lining, Chairman.¹⁰⁰

John Signall was not a good manager. Without his partner, he would probably have floundered about for a season or two, as so many other good actors had done, and then returned, with a sigh, to acting. Thomas Wade West, on the other hand, had all the necessary talents of a good manager. He could hold himself aloof from actors quarrels, and thus see them in their true proportions. He could weld a company together, set standards of excellence for them, and insist that they strive toward those standards. He had a good head for business, and was able to build up a strong and solvent company where others had failed. He was respected in every community in which his company played; but where he was respected, John Signall was loved. Signall's death was a personal loss to all who had seen him on the stage.

On the Death of Mr. Signall
Loud tolls the bell! hark, hark! the dismal sound,
Conveys distressing tidings all around;
The doleful knell each serious thought inspires,
And, "Who's departed?" friend to friend inquires.
'Tis Signall gone. Theatric humour's fled!
Mirth is no more; and Shelly, too, is dead!
Mourn, mourn ye Orphans, mourn your oft try'd friend,
Break forth and sigh and let a tear descend:
Lament, Columbia's daughters that no more
His varied talents cause the house to roar
With loud applauses! Ye can ne'er forget
His action, humour, merriment and wit!
Let the soft voice in accents mild, deplore

¹⁰⁰ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 227-28

His fate, who often pleased, to please no more,
 And ye, fair freedom's sons a tribute pay,
 To merit gone. Now hastening to decay.
 Though earth enfolds what once could pleasure give,
 Still let his talents in your memory live;
 Still let the heart which charity could warm,
 Where dwelt benevolence, your mem'ry charm
 Now yours the tear- though man this weakness braves,
 A public loss a public sorrow craves.
 But this be yours: to stem the widows grief
 And sympathizing, render wished relief.
 Enough- -Way strangers, when they view this stone
 Cry, "There lies Signall- Ah. poor Shelty's gone."¹⁰¹

Shelty, the engaging character in the Highland Reel was not dead. He would appear many more times; but he would not again be such a lovable fellow or so endear himself to his audiences. Thomas Wade West, who through tact and good management, had come through a trying season with flying colors, had lost not only his partner and closest friend, but the most valuable actor his company would ever have.

¹⁰¹ Quoted from a Charleston paper in the Virginia Gazette, and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser, October 2, 1794.

CHAPTER VI

Minor Entertainments:
Songs and Recitations
Fireworks
Circus
Exhibitions

CHAPTER VI

Although West and Bignall provided the best entertainment which Virginians had experienced for many years, it was not the only entertainment. In spite of its lack of large cities, Virginia gave quarter to a surprising number of second-rate actors, tumblers, rope dancers, animal trainers, tricksters, and exhibitors of everything from engravings to elephants.

In the early months of 1793, Alexandrians were offered tricks with cards, boxes, ribbons, and laces by a Mr. Card. By the second of November, Mr. Card had "added to his company and fitted up a decent snug theatre in the house in which he had been performing."¹ The additions to his company (he seems to have been the only member before the additions) included Mr. Paulds and Mr. Saunders, from Sadlers Wells; Master Burt, a child of seven; and Mr. and Mrs. Moore, "late of the Old American Company."² Mr. Saunders was a boy of thirteen who did tumbling feats with Mr. Paulds and also danced on the slack wire, playing "an instrument at the same time."³ Mr. Moore, it is interesting to note, had not been with the Old American Company for eight years. He had gone to Albany with Allen, when Hallam and Allen separated in 1785.⁴

¹ Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette, November 2, 1793.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 200.

he had more recently come from Newport, Rhode Island, where he and his wife had completed the season under the management of Mr. Harper.⁵

In less than a week, Mr. Card and his enlarged company had competition. A theatre opened in Fullmore's Long Room under the direction of Mr. McGrath. This is the same Christopher Charles McGrath, the "spoiled priest, turned itinerant player,"⁶ who had started his theatrical career with Godwin in Charleston in 1786.⁷ Evidently, the company of this new theatre consisted solely of Mr. McGrath and his wife, and Mr. and Mrs. Fitzgerald.⁸ With such a small cast, it would seem impossible to attempt such plays as Douglas, The Lying Valet,⁹ The King and the Miller of Mansfield, The Contrast,¹⁰ The Roman Father, and the Poor Soldier;¹¹ but these plays were produced by this company. Unless the regular cast were assisted by amateurs, which seems unlikely as no "gentlemen for their amusement" are mentioned, the plays were merely cut to fit the cast. The results of this type of cutting were not altogether satisfactory. When the same thing was done in Norfolk

⁵ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, III, 255.

⁶ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 183.

⁷ Willis, The Charleston Theatre, 114.

⁸ Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette, November 6, 1793.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., November 9, 1793.

¹¹ Ibid., November 13, 1793.

some years later, a critic complained:

We regret much that Mr. Beaumont has not a full company of performers . . . as this deficit makes it indispensable to curtail some and omit other parts where all is excellent: this destroys the plot and greatly diminishes the effect of the Catastrophe.¹²

But regardless of the evidence of poor quality in Mr. McGrath's productions, they seem to have put an end to those of Mr. Card's company. Mr. Card himself, however, continued to entertain whatever audience he could gather with new feats of tumbling and grand and lofty balancing.¹³ He later traveled with a Mr. Parz who performed on the slack wire without a balance pole.¹⁴ Mr. and Mrs. Moore left and entertained on their own. In May of 1794, they were in Fredericksburg, giving an entertainment at the Market House for a price of fifty cents, which was half the usual price for a theatre ticket.¹⁵ Their program consisted of songs and recitations, which included "Brother Moore's...eulogy on Free-masonry,"¹⁶ which he had given the year before in Newport.¹⁷

Here again, in Fredericksburg, McGrath and his company were close on the heels of the Moores. This time, however, The Moores joined his

¹² American Beacon (Norfolk), September 15, 1815.

¹³ The Norfolk Herald, January 30, 1800.

¹⁴ The Norfolk Herald, January 8, 1800.

¹⁵ Virginia Herald, & Fredericksburg Advertiser, May 8, 1794.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, III, 255.

company, which had grown in the last eight months and now included Mr. Smith, Mr. Andrews, Miss Marshall, and Mr. Godwin.¹⁸ There is no mention of the Fitzgeralds.

The theatre in Fredericksburg, "under the direction of Mr. Godrath,"¹⁹ opened on June nineteenth, 1794, with the tragedy Douglas, with Godwin playing the part of Old Norval. The musical farce Waterman followed the tragedy, and the program concluded with "Bucks Have at ye all!" with additions by Mr. Godwin. The tickets sold at four shillings six pence, and "in order to accomodate families, children will be admitted two on one ticket."²⁰ Drama in the south seems always to have drawn a democratic audience: planter and sailor, black and white, free and slave, old and young; and children, two on a ticket.

The production on June twenty-sixth was for the "benefit of Mr. and Mrs. Godwin and children."²¹ The plays were The Gemster and the musical drama Elopement, but the most interesting item on the program was "an Italian hornpipe" by Mr. Godwin.²² Since it had been thirty-nine years since Godwin's name had appeared on American playbills, he must certainly have been close to sixty years old at this time. The

¹⁸ Virginia Herald, & Fredericksburg Advertiser, June 19, 1794.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., June 26, 1794.

²² Ibid.

Italian hornpipe was quite an accomplishment for a man of his years.

The program offered for the fourth of July is of particular interest because it seems to have been custom-built for the audience by the singer, actor, author, manager, Christopher Charles McGrath.

THEATRE
Under McGrath
Friday the fourth
Prelude called THE 4TH OF JULY;
or America's Triumph

In which Mr. McGrath in the character of a citizen soldier will have the honor of addressing the Patriotic sons of Saint Tammany, St. Dennis, St. Patrick, St. George, and St. Andrew-- with a grateful Tribute to the Departed Heroes who greatly bled for Independence.

The Prelude to close with an affectionate Reference to the Beloved Guardian of Our Constitution.

- - - -
Songs and Chorus of Independancy
Mr. Smith Mrs. Moore
Mr. Moore Miss Marshall
Mr. Andrews

On this occasion will be displayed in Transparencies, Portraits, of Twelve Republican Worthies, accompanied by that of his Excellency, the President.

- - - -
The patriotic play, THE ROMAN FATHER; or, LOVE and LIBERTY

- - - -
Garricks comedy, THE LYING VALET

- - - -
LIVE THE REPUBLIC! !23

This is the last theatre advertisement in the newspaper until the theatre, under McGrath, reopened in September. This season was to be a short one, running only through the race week. The company appears to have broken up shortly after this; for on the eighteenth of

February of 1796, Godwin and his wife were giving the usual program of songs and recitations²⁴ which actors invariably resorted to when they found it necessary to entertain singly or in couples. This type of entertainment was a sign that at least one accomplished and talented actor was temporarily unemployed, indicating that Virginia audiences, when deprived of first class theatrical presentations, willingly paid for drama in this diluted form.

Although his audiences did not realize it at the time, Virginians were seeing Mr. Godwin for the last time. This was his fortieth year on the American stage, for he had made his debut in Philadelphia in 1766.²⁵ Breaking from David Douglass' company, he had become one of the members, and probably the manager, of the first "Virginia Company" that had played in Williamsburg under that name in 1768.²⁶ During the Revolution, he had been one of the company of American actors in Jamaica;²⁷ but in 1784 he had become one of the company which Dennis Ryan brought to Richmond to give Virginia her first post-war theatre.²⁸ In 1786, he and Mr. Kidd had built Savannah's first theatre, and the next year he had built Harmony Hall, Charleston's first post-war

²⁴ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, February 18, 1796.

²⁵ Pollock, The Philadelphia Theatre, 86.

²⁶ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 44-45.

²⁷ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 135.

²⁸ Virginia Gazette, and Weekly Advertiser, November 27, 1784.

theatre.²⁹ After the failure of that venture, he had traveled, sometimes with McGrath and sometimes alone, back and forth across the country, from Pennsylvania to Georgia. Traveling roads which were either dusty or slippery with mud, or sailing seas and rivers which were even more unpredictable, he had brought a taste of drama to communities so small they could not otherwise have enjoyed it. He had seen the audience riot when he failed to dance as advertised in the bills, and had later danced in spite of an injured foot.³⁰ He had wounded himself severely while playing Jaffier in Venice Preserved when a real dagger had been put in his hand instead of the usual prop.³¹ He had staked everything on his Charleston theatre, and had lost. More than once, he had been reduced to giving dancing lessons. Never a great actor, he was none the less a great trouper.

There was still another couple whose entertainment resembled that of the McGrath's and the Moore's--that of Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, who had come to Virginia with Dennis Ryan in 1784. They presented an Olio of Theatrical Entertainment which they assured the public would be "conducted with the utmost decency and decorum."³² The profits from this performance were "intended to discharge debts unavoidably contract-

²⁹ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 103.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² The Virginia Herald (Fredericksburg), June 5, 1788.

ed.³³

In addition to such programs as the Lewis', the Godwin's, and the Moore's, and the performances of second-class companies of comedians such as Mr. Card's and Mr. McGrath's, Virginians enjoyed several other forms of entertainment. Louis Bousell held his dancing classes and practice balls in Richmond,³⁴ Fredericksburg,³⁵ Williamsburg,³⁶ and Norfolk.³⁷ M. Rosainville, "master fire worker" gave exhibitions of his art in Richmond,³⁸ Norfolk,³⁹ and Fredericksburg.⁴⁰ Mr. Cusinier offered similiar displays to the residents of Fredericksburg,⁴¹ and Mr. Ambroise entertained the residents of Alexandria with comperable pyrotechnics.⁴² Mr. Cusinier's program is reminiscent of Mr. McGrath's fourth of July program. It is of particular interest

³³ The Virginia Herald, June 5, 1798.

³⁴ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, November 5, 1794.

³⁵ Virginia Herald, & Fredericksburg Advertiser, September 19, 1793; April 10, 1794.

³⁶ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, November 5, 1794.

³⁷ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, March 11, 1795.

³⁸ Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, September 25, 1793.

³⁹ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, June 13, 1794; The Norfolk Herald, September 1, 1798, April 30, 1799.

⁴⁰ Virginia Herald, & Fredericksburg Advertiser, April 9, 1795.

⁴¹ Ibid., supplement to, March 27, 1794.

⁴² The Times and Alexandria Advertiser, November 30, 1797.

because of the way in which America and France are linked by the word "Liberty." Virginians were very pro-French⁴³ at this time and were no doubt pleased with the promise that:

The fireworks will terminate with a representation of the Temple of Liberty- -six pyramids on top of which will appear atmospheric beauties, supported by cascades of water; at the bottom of the Temple will be a superb portico of Doric order, in the middle of which will be erected the altar of Liberty.⁴⁴

To top it all, in grand conclusion were:

figures holding flags of France and America, covered with caps of Liberty, announced by a discharge of one hundred artificial cannon and rockets and crowned with an atmospheric nosegay.⁴⁵

In a similar vein, M. Bosainville opened his program in Norfolk, on the thirteenth of June in 1794, with "a salute or discharge by a frigate wearing a French flag."⁴⁶ This particular program consisted of two such pieces which were followed by the grand conclusion:

A NAVAL ENGAGEMENT

between two frigates, one under the American flag, the other wearing the Algerian. The last will be cut to pieces by the American frigate who will, after a desperate engagement, sink her adversary. The two ships are of the same size and as large as the house can afford.⁴⁷

Shorter and less spectacular exhibitions of fireworks were often

⁴³ Moreau de Saint Méry, American Journey, 58-59.

⁴⁴ Virginia Herald, & Fredericksburg Advertiser, supplement to, March 27, 1794.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, June 13, 1794.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

advertised as part of the entertainment to be enjoyed in the pleasure gardens which were becoming popular.⁴⁸

Still another form of entertainment which Virginians enjoyed was amateur dramatics. This had long been a socially acceptable form of amusement in the South. There is mention of it as early as 1751.⁴⁹ In the summer of 1794, a group of "gentlemen of Fredericksburg" performed Rowe's tragedy The Fair Penitent and Garrick's comedy All the World's a Stage "for a benevolent purpose."⁵⁰ In Alexandria, a Society of Young Gentlemen gave several productions of Venice Preserved, Love-a-la-Mode, Gentle Shephard, and The Apprentice between May second and December thirteenth of 1798. These performances were given for the "benefit of the poor,"⁵¹ or "for the purpose of repairing the Alexandria Academy."⁵² In the advertisement for a second benefit for the Academy, the interesting statement was made that the residue would be disposed of "for the general benefit of the Dramatic Company under the direction of Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Shaw."⁵³ The "Young Gentlemen" went

⁴⁸ A number of such exhibitions were advertised by Lindsay's Gardens and Mr. Rourk's Gardens in Norfolk.

⁴⁹ "Diary of John Blair," William and Mary Quarterly, 1st ser., VIII (1899), 16.

⁵⁰ Virginia Herald, & Fredericksburg Advertiser, August 14, 1794.

⁵¹ The Times and Alexandria Advertiser, December 4, 1798.

⁵² Ibid., May 2, 1798.

⁵³ Ibid., May 12, 1798.

on to explain that great credit was due Mr. Hamilton for his instruction and to Mrs. Shaw for the part she played.⁵⁴ It is interesting to see professional and amateur so harmoniously mingling on the stage.

More popular, were the equestrian performances interspersed with comic songs and antic maneuvers of a clown, known as the circus. The most outstanding circus manager of the time was John Bill Ricketts, a Scotch equestrian who was described in a Philadelphia newspaper as "the most graceful, neat, and expert public performer on horseback that ever appeared in any part of the world."⁵⁵ He had operated a riding school in Philadelphia in 1792, and the demonstrations of skill which he had given in connection with it had proved so popular that he had decided to open his first circus there in 1794.⁵⁶ In this venture, with the aid of Mr. MacDonald as clown, he was so successful that he was encouraged to erect a building to house his performances. While this building was being erected, he toured the South with his company.

In Norfolk, in 1794, a large crowd paid a dollar, or seventy-five cents, depending upon their seats, to see his performances.⁵⁷ To those Virginians of the eighteenth century who considered horseback riding as a daily necessity, horsemanship an art, and horse

⁵⁴ The Times and Alexandria Advertiser, May 12, 1793.

⁵⁵ Greenwood, The Circus, 73.

⁵⁶ Moreau de St. Méry, American Journey, 348.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 354.

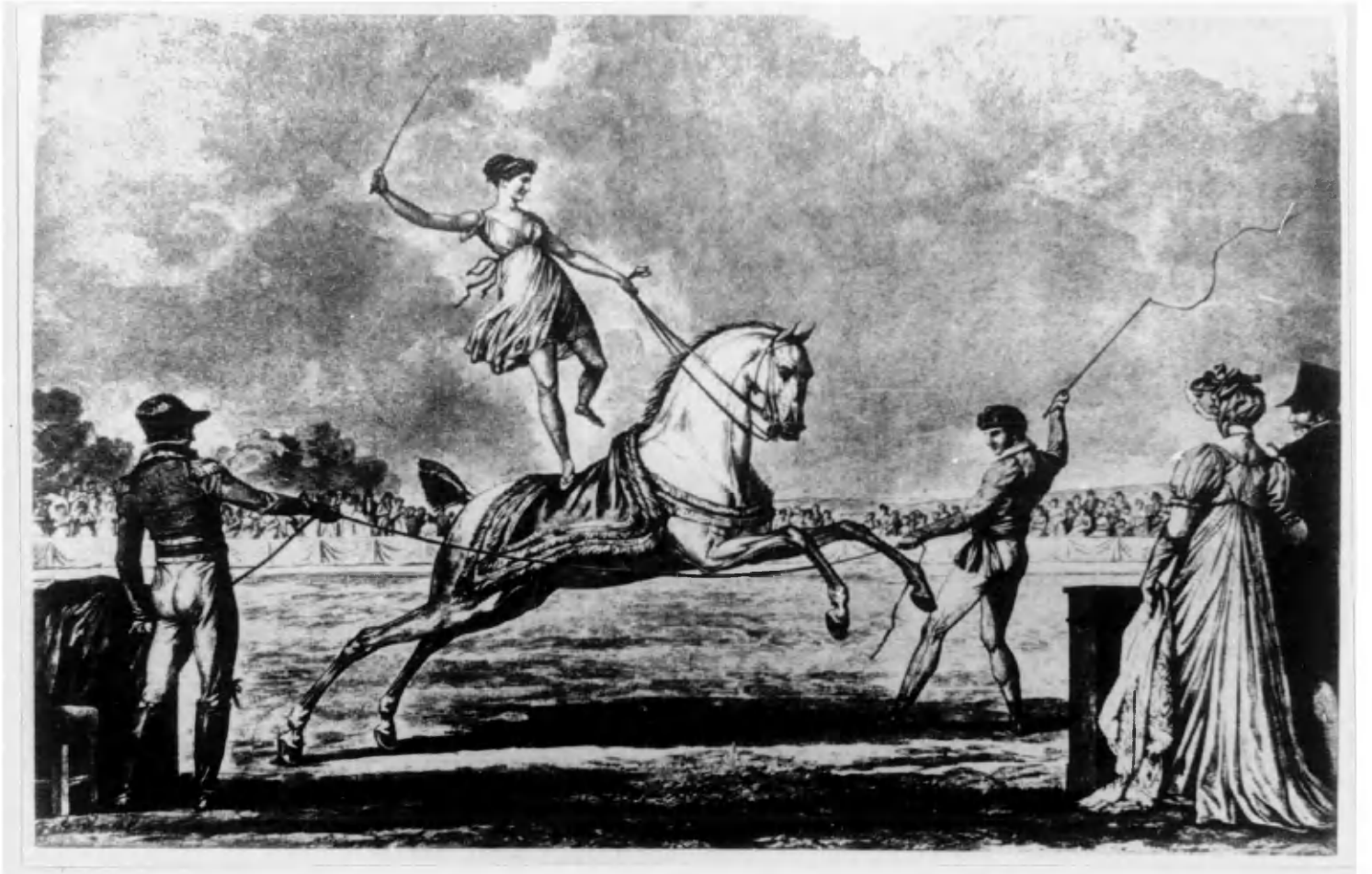


PLATE 6

FEMALE CIRCUS PERFORMER

rating an exciting amusement, Ricketts circus must certainly have proved a great treat; for his feats in the saddle were indeed breathtaking. He could ride on the shoulders of two men, mounted on separate horses, thus forming the apex of a triangle fifteen feet high. He could ride two horses at full gallop, each foot resting on a quart mug standing loose on the saddle. Mounted on his horse Cornplanter, he could jump over another horse of fourteen hands,⁵⁸ and he could throw a somersault over thirty men's heads and over five horses at full gallop and leap over a garter or ribbon twelve feet high.⁵⁹

Moreau de Saint Méry comments on the fact that there were separate seats for persons of color.⁶⁰ This is the first notice we have of the Negroes' participation as a part of the audience, in public entertainment. Although they were relegated to the gallery or otherwise segregated, they were none the less a part of the audience. Their laughter and applause mingled with that of their less spontaneous masters and made for a keener enjoyment for all.

A rival of Ricketts in the field of circus entertainment was M. Lailson and his troupe of French equestrians. M. Lailson's company appeared first in Boston in 1796.⁶¹ The following year Lailson came

⁵⁸ Illustrated in Plate no. 6.

⁵⁹ Greenwood, The Circus, 71-72.

⁶⁰ Moreau de Saint Méry, American Journey, 54.

⁶¹ Greenwood, The Circus, 75.



to Philadelphia where he also erected a building and initiated performances in competition with Hickett's circus. At the end of the year, M. Lailson was bankrupt and was said to have departed for the West Indies and been "heard of no more."⁶² If he did go to the West Indies, he did not depart immediately; for he toured the South during the next two years.⁶³ In these performances, Mr. Sully acted as clown. Since the clown also performed "vaulting and surprising Leaps and Lofty Tumbling,"⁶⁴ the Mr. Sully was no doubt Matthew, Jr. Lailson's performances in Virginia are of particular interest because of his use of women as performers. Miss Vanios, "first equestrian female in America,"⁶⁵ no doubt added much to the show although she executed nothing more complicated than the graceful riding of the French equestrian in Plate no. 7. In 1798, a second "female" was added to the company in the person of M. Lailson's seven year old daughter.⁶⁶

A less exciting form of amusement, which seems to have drawn crowds, was the exhibition of strange animals. The following is an example of the advertisements which tempted the curious:

⁶² Greenwood, The Circus, 75.

⁶³ Virginia Gazette and Petersburg Intelligencer, October 24, 1797, November 3, 1797; The Times and Alexandria Advertiser, September 2, 9, 15, 1797, June 14, 18, 20, 1798.

⁶⁴ The Times and Alexandria Advertiser, September 15, 1797.

⁶⁵ Ibid., September 9, 1797.

⁶⁶ Ibid., June 14, 1798.

By Permission
A CAMEL
Of Monstrous Size
From Asia

Monday night and every succeeding day during the week at
Mr. Nicholas Booz's new building.

When the Camel lies down, five or six grown persons may get on
him and he will rise himself up with ease. He smiles to the
ladies and laughs to the gentlemen.

Grown persons 1s 6d
Children 9d 67

In addition to the camel, Virginians had the rare treat of
gaping at an elephant which had been purchased for "ten thousand
dollars"⁶⁸ and, a year later, at a lion.⁶⁹ Less spectacular animals
performed. In 1796, Mr. Salenka's "Learned Dog" performed at the
Borough Tavern,⁷⁰ and three years later, Mr. Hamilton's "Learned Pig"
entertained the residents of Norfolk at the same tavern.⁷¹ The last
performance of the learned pig was advertised "for the benefit of the
town."⁷² The citizens of Norfolk also had the opportunity of
witnessing bull and bear baiting at Bourk's Gardens, Briggs Point.⁷³

Signior Falconi offered another type of entertainment which

⁶⁷ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, May 9,
1796.

⁶⁸ The Times and Alexandria Advertiser, October 15, 1798.

⁶⁹ The Virginia Herald (Fredericksburg), June 21, 1799.

⁷⁰ The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, December 29, 1796.

⁷¹ The Norfolk Herald, November 26, 1799.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., September 18, 1798.

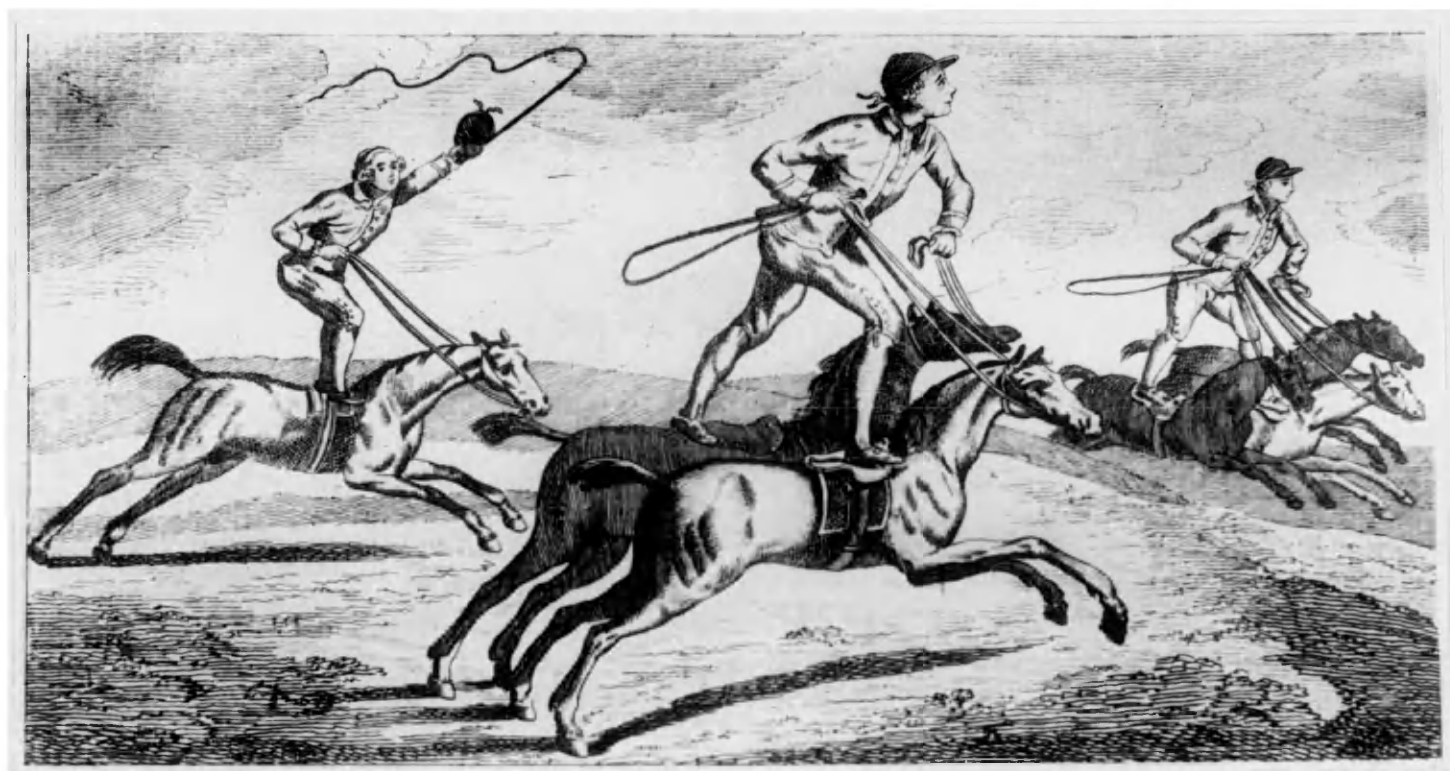


PLATE 7

FEATS OF HORSEMANSHIP IN THE CIRCUS

was to be popular in slightly varying forms for many years. His "Philosophical" performances included such things as the Sagacious Mermaid, the Sympathetic Wind-Mill, and the Learned Swan.⁷⁴ One such automaton, an Indian, would shoot with a bow and arrow any number requested on a board ten or twelve feet away from him.⁷⁵ Another, a small gold head shut up in a tumbler, would answer questions by signs⁷⁶ or numbers.⁷⁷ The Norfolk audience seem to have been somewhat less credulous when it came to accepting these automatons at their face value; for the newspaper there carried the notice:

A CARD

Signior Falconi begs leave to observe that some persons have insinuated the impossibility of inventing an automaton which would come to the idea given in his bills; that it was not the figure which dotted the i, and crossed the t, or that wrote the answer to any given question, but a deception practiced by the performer himself. Signior Falconi wishing therefore to convince the incredulous of their mistake regarding this extraordinary piece of mechanism will admit any gentleman on stage, near the figure while it shall be writing, that they may testify to the public what has been asserted.⁷⁸

Signior Falconi varied his program from time to time with performances as a rope dance,⁷⁹ a hornpipe,⁸⁰ or "interesting scenes in the Chinese

⁷⁴ Virginia Gazette, and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser, November 24, 1794.

⁷⁵ Ibid., December 8, 1794.

⁷⁶ Epitome of the Times (Norfolk), November 12, 1798.

⁷⁷ Virginia Herald, & Fredericksburg Advertiser, February 5, 1796

⁷⁸ Epitome of the Times (Norfolk), November 12, 1798.

⁷⁹ The Norfolk Herald, October 9, 1798.

⁸⁰ Virginia Herald, & Fredericksburg Advertiser, February 5, 1796

Shades⁸¹ such as "the thunder storm at sea,"⁸² the ship-wreck, or the "Battle between the Elephant and the Ourang Outang."⁸³ In 1799, Signior Falconi turned from his "natural and philosophical experiments"⁸⁴ to "experiments in electricity."⁸⁵

The Waxworks provided another popular form of entertainment. It is amusing to see the progress of history reflected, somewhat slowly, in the procession of full length figures. In 1798, Norfolk citizens were given an exhibition of the "King and Queen of France" at the Sign of the Indian Queen on Water Street.⁸⁶ The same figures were no doubt shown two years later as a part of the larger exhibition of "about two hundred of the most distinguished characters of the French Revolution,"⁸⁷ including the King and the Royal Family. Some "Elegant Engravings of the Revolution" were also shown; but the pièce de résistance seems to have been "An Optical Machine" which contained, among a series of well executed pieces, "the interior of the BASTILLE, esteemed by the artist to be a masterpiece of work -- personages appearing as

⁸¹ Virginia Gazette, and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser, November 24, 1794.

⁸² Virginia Herald, & Fredericksburg Advertiser, February 5, 1795

⁸³ Epitome of the Times (Norfolk), November 12, 1798.

⁸⁴ Ibid., November 12, 1798.

⁸⁵ The Virginia Herald (Fredericksburg), February 22, 1799.

⁸⁶ The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, December 5, 1796.

⁸⁷ Ibid., January 13, 1798.

big as life -- a very neat piece of the Assassination of Marat, by the beautiful Charlotte Corday."⁸⁸ The same Waxworks were seen in Alexandria three months later;⁸⁹ and it seems probably that this same, dated, shabby little show was seen throughout the South wherever there was a tavern willing to shelter it for a few days.

Then, too, there were the horse races, about which other entertainments tended to cluster. These races must have been as colorful as they were exciting, the rider being required to dress in a silk or satin jacket, whole or half boots, and a jockey cap.⁹⁰ Virginia towns were small, and the populace as a whole was far from wealthy, but it was heartily in favor of public entertainment. There seems to have been little difficulty in gathering an audience for any public performance the entertainers wished to offer; but while these minor entertainments, like fireflies, lent a momentary bit of brightness to life in the isolated communities in the rural south, the Virginia Company became an integral part of the life in each community in which it played. It came to own its own theatre in each town and to return to each at approximately the same season every year. Gentlemen wrote plays for it,⁹¹ and discussed with the managers the possibilities or

⁸⁸ The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, January 13, 1798.

⁸⁹ The Times and Alexandria Advertiser, April 18, 1798.

⁹⁰ The Norfolk Herald, April 20, 1799.

⁹¹ Discussion of some of the gentlemen and the plays they wrote for the Virginia Company contained in the following works: Colonel

difficulties of production.⁹² Disasters which befell the actors when they were out of town were considered newsworthy by the local papers. In a period in which only a small number of obituaries were printed in the newspapers, and those being of the town's most influential residents only, the deaths of most of the actors of the Virginia Company were recorded in the newspapers of the towns in which they habitually played. Even the death of "Sarah Gordon, wife of Mr. Gordon, comedian,"⁹³ in Richmond was considered of sufficient interest to the residents of Fredericksburg to warrant the printing of an obituary in their gazette. The possessive attitude which each town seemed to feel toward the Virginia Company is reflected in the comments of the travelers. When Robert Hunter, Jr., recorded in his diary, "The players are at present at Peterburg,"⁹⁴ or Moreau de Méry wrote that in the summer, Norfolk enjoyed the performances, in a brick theatre, of the players who wintered in Richmond,⁹⁵ they reflected their host's pride in their theatre and in the players who, although they were not in Petersburg

Robert Munford, The Candidates; or, the Humours of a Virginia Election, Ed. Jay B. Hubbell and Douglass Adair (Williamsburg, Virginia: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1948), 3-11; Agnes M. Bondurant, Foe's Richmond (Richmond, Virginia, 1942), 130; John P. Kennedy, Memoirs of the Life of William Wirt, Attorney-General of the United States (Philadelphia, 1854), I, 307, 313-14, 318; Playbill for the Richmond Theatre, December 26, 1811, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia.

⁹² Kennedy, Memoirs, I, 307, 313-14.

⁹³ The Virginia Herald, & Fredericksburg Advertiser, April 7, 1791

⁹⁴ Hunter, Quebec to Carolina, 236.

⁹⁵ Oscar Handlin, editor, This Was America (Cambridge, 1949), 91.

or Richmond at that time, would return in October or in April. Thus, while the minor entertainments of the period reflect little more than the curiosity of the people of Virginia, the performances of the Virginia Company were subtly attuned to the desires and demands of the audience.

CHAPTER VII

Managers Cooperate: West and Solles

Development of Elaborate Spectacle in the Pantomime

Building of the Petersburg Theatre

CHAPTER VII

It was early in May of 1795 when the Virginia Company returned to Norfolk after a six month's season in Charleston.¹ The wounds of war were no longer visible as they sailed into the harbor. Norfolk had grown. It now had a population of over three thousand,² and its exports, consisting chiefly of tobacco, wheat, Indian corn and meal, salt beef, pork, fish, tar, turpentine, flaxseed, iron, lead, and timber of all kinds, had reached the sum of \$1,934,827.³ The harbor bristled with masts, for over eighty deep-water vessels and ten coasters operated out of the harbor, and over a hundred more carried goods inland, up the winding rivers and into the Chesapeake.⁴ Norfolk had two printing houses, one of which was busy setting the first American edition of Shakespeare's works, and two newspapers, the American Gazette and the Herald. It supported a book dealer who made quite an advantageous business of renting books.⁵ It boasted a courthouse, a prison, an academy, and a new brick theatre.⁷ The

¹ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 259-83

² Moreau de St. Méry, American Journey, 51.

³ William S. Forrest, Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Norfolk and Vicinity (Philadelphia, 1853), 101.

⁴ Moreau de St. Méry, American Journey, 51.

⁵ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, September 7, 1795.

⁶ Moreau de St. Méry, American Journey, 52.

⁷ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, September 7, 1795.

theatre which seems to have been owned by Mrs. West, even before her husband's death,⁸ must have been a durable one; for it appears to have been in more or less constant use until its destruction by fire in 1843.⁹

The company which Mr. West¹⁰ brought to Norfolk this season presented some new faces as well as those which had become familiar to Virginia audiences. The new people, however, were on the whole inferior in acting ability to the veteran members of the company, with one notable exception. Mrs. Pick, the wife of Jacobus Pick, a musician, was given many of the leading parts this season, especially those requiring a pretty young face and a good singing voice. Also listed as making "his first appearance on this stage"¹¹ was Mr. J. West. This was James West who, we assume, was the son of the manager.¹² He served no apprenticeship with the company, but, may have, like

⁸ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, September 7, 1796 mentions "Mrs. West's liberal offer of the theatre here."

⁹ Thomas B. Rowland, "Norfolk Theatres of Olden Times," Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquary, II, 102.

¹⁰ Mrs. Pignall does not seem to have taken any interest in the management. Mr. West probably bought her share soon after her husband's death.

¹¹ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, May 13, 1796.

¹² See Appendix III. This was the James West who was security at the marriage of Harriet West (noted as Thomas Wade West's daughter) and Isaac Pignall. We assume then, that he is her older brother, although he might have been an uncle, or no relation at all.

Lawrence Sully, already made his own way in England before his family came to America. Had he served his apprenticeship in England, his assumption of leading roles at this time would seem more plausible.

Another addition to the company at this time was that of Mr. and Mrs. Doctor, who played such minor roles as "the first shepherd" and "the second shepherdess."¹³ There were times, however, when Mr. Doctor shed the anonymity of the first shepherd and became Signor Joseph Doctor. At such times, he performed "surprising postures and equilibriums" such as going through a hoop with a pyramid of thirteen glasses on his forehead,¹⁴ or throwing a somersault backwards running up a plank, at the same time setting off a brace of pistols.¹⁵

It may seem strange that Mr. West, who seems to have struggled constantly to bring better theatre to Virginia, would so cater to the less intelligent elements of his audience; but his success lay in this very ability to test the temper of his audiences and serve up what they most desired. Signor Joseph Doctor was no doubt extremely popular in this cosmopolitan town where language differences hampered the enjoyment of pure drama. Granted that the applause received came chiefly from the gallery, from the sailors and ship-builders, from the slaves and free persons of color, and from the women of Water Street, it was none the less, applause. Theatre which caters only to the

¹³ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, May 13, 1795.

¹⁴ Ibid., May 27, 1795.

¹⁵ Ibid., June 17, 1795.

the intellectuals has a tendency to become effete, and the Norfolk gallery added vitality in much the same manner as did the pit in Shakespeare's day.

The program offered this season was of particular interest when considered in juxtaposition to the needs and desires of the Norfolk audience. There were the latest importations from London to tempt the palate of the intellectuals; old favorites for the more conservative element; and elaborate scenery, processions, and dances, with a strong accent on music, for those to whom language might be a barrier to enjoyment. There was also a very definite bow to the French, who made up a large proportion of the population, many of the St. Domingans having chosen to settle permanently in Norfolk.¹⁶ Mrs. Decker's performance of "The Marseillaise Hymn, dressed in the character of an American Officer,"¹⁷ and the production and repetition of La Forêt Noire, for which Mr. Decker had composed all new music,¹⁸ stand out as examples of this French influence.

The romance The Enchantress; or, Cymon and Sylvia was given on May 13, with Mr. J. West playing Cymon and Mrs. Pick, Sylvia. As Mr.

¹⁶ Moreau de St, Méry, American Journey, 49.

¹⁷ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, August 10, 1795.

¹⁸ Ibid., August 31, 1795. This production on the thirty-first was advertised as being the second. Another performance was given on September 7, 1795.

West himself played the part of Linco, "the merry shepherd," he had cause to miss his former partner. John Signall, who had played so many parts so well, left a hole in the company which was difficult to fill. His parts were taken by Mr. J. Kenna or by Mr. West. Both men were competent and experienced actors, but neither had that spark of genius with which John Signall brought a character to life and made him loved. Mr. J. Kenna played the part of Shelty this season,¹⁹ and he was no doubt comical and entertaining; but Virginia audiences probably agreed with those of South Carolina: poor Shelty was dead.

Since John Signall was so surely missed this season, it seems strange to find "Mr. Signall" still playing a prominent part, according to the advertisements in the newspapers. On closer scrutiny, however, it becomes apparent that the parts he played were much less important than those of his predecessor, who was probably his brother.²⁰ He is Isaac, the I. Signall, who had played in Richmond in 1792. He was to marry Harriet West, Thomas Wade West's daughter,²¹

¹⁹ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, June 24, 1796.

²⁰ Byley in The Itinerant refers to Signall as a "young adventurer" in 1785. It does not seem possible that seven years later he could have had sons acting on the stage with him as J. Signall and I. Signall. Mrs. Signall, from the parts she played, does not seem old enough to have had two grown sons in 1792 (when Isaac and John Signall first appeared on the stage). Also, if I. Signall were Mrs. Signall's son, he would be marrying his aunt, in marrying Harriet West. None of these things in themselves prove anything; but taken together, they suggest that Isaac Signall was not Mrs. Signall's son.

²¹ George H. Tucker, editor, Abstracts from Norfolk City Marriage Bonds (1797-1860) (Richmond, 1934), 4.

who was appearing on the stage for the first time this season, and together they would play on many stages until they settled down in their old age in Philadelphia.²² Both Isaac Bignall and Harriet West were dependable and competent players who, if not born to the theatre, were at least well bred in it.

The Virginia Company had only one great actress at this time, and they were well blessed in her. Mrs. Bignall was, indeed, a great actress; Aaron Burr, marveling at her acting, was amazed to find her playing only in the little towns of the South.²³ She far excelled the other actresses who, in going north, had found favor in the cities of Philadelphia and New York; but personal loyalty and family connections kept her in the South for the remainder of her life. On the thirteenth of May, in addition to her appearance as Fatima in The Enchantress, she played what seems to have been her favorite part: Little Pickle in Bickerstaff's farce The Spoiled Child.²⁴ On the thirtieth of May, the parts of Indians in Steele's Conscious Lover and that of Caroline in The Frise, parts which the Norfolk audience would expect to find assigned to Mrs. Bignall, were played by Mrs. J. West. There was no explanation that the actress was the same

²² The Theatrical Censor, 1805, 3.

²³ Wyatt, "Three Petersburg Theatres," William and Mary Quarterly, XXI (1941), 95-96.

²⁴ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, May 13, 1795.

although her name had been changed.²⁵ Perhaps no explanation was necessary. Norfolk was a small town, and she was its favorite actress. No doubt the Norfolk audiences, having watched the romance grow, needed no program note or newspaper article to explain the change in the name of their favorite.

The Sully family by 1796 had split up. Thomas had been apprenticed to a broker in Charleston, while the family was playing in that city. His master, however, complained that, although he was very industrious in multiplying figures, all the figures were drawings of men and women, and he advised that young Thomas be apprenticed, rather, to an artist.²⁶ Since Julia Sully had married a French miniature painter, M. Nelson,²⁷ Thomas was apprenticed to him. Charlotte Sully, who was now Mrs. Chambers, had gone north with her husband, taking little Harriet with her.²⁸ The rest of the family were, presumably, in Norfolk at this time. Mr. and Mrs. Sully and Matthew appeared on the stage. Lawrence seems to have been staying with his family "at

²⁵ Two years later, when she played in Petersburg for the first time in several years, it was thought necessary to explain in the advertisements that Mrs. J. West was the late Mrs. Bignall: Virginia Gazette, & Petersburg Intelligencer, May 26, 1797.

²⁶ William Dunlap, The Arts of Design in the United States, edited, with additions by Frank W. Bayley and Charles E. Joadspeed, (Boston, 1918), II, 237.

²⁷ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 320.

²⁸ Harriet was with them in 1796, and seems to have remained with them as "Mr. Chamber's pupil," and she went to Antigua with them in 1801.

Mrs. Haynes, at the back of the theatre;"²⁹ for he advertised that his stay would be short, but while he was in Norfolk, he would do miniature painting, mourning and fancy devices "executed in the most elegant manner with or without hair."³⁰ Mrs. Sully gave a series of concerts during the 1795 season with Jacobus Pick and his wife. The first of the series was given in Charleston in April. This concert, given for the benefit of Mr. J. West, featured Mr. Dubois, Mr. J. West, Mrs. Pick, Mrs. Placide, and Mrs. Sully.³¹ The Norfolk concert was given on June tenth for the benefit of Mrs. Pick and Mrs. Sully; Mr. Pick accompanied on the violin, while Mrs. Sully played a grand sonata on the pianoforte, or joined his wife in a duet.³² The influence of the French was reflected in this program in "A French Song, by Mr. Pick" and the "Marseillaise Hymn in English, by Mrs. Pick."³³ This concert was repeated in Petersburg on the twenty-fifth of June³⁴ and in

²⁹ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, June 6, 1795. The whole family stayed with Mrs. Haynes whenever they were in Norfolk. In 1803, Thomas Sully painted two portraits (No. 757 and 758 in Biddle and Bantle, The Life and Works of Thomas Sully) for Mrs. Haynes, by which he may have paid his family's bill.

³⁰ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, June 6, 1795.

³¹ Sonneck, Concert Life in America, 31.

³² The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, June 10, 1795.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Sonneck, Concert Life in America, 59.

Alexandria on the sixteenth of July.³⁵ It was doubtless given in other towns where there were no newspapers to advertise or record it.

While Mrs. Pick was absent on her concert tour, the leading singing roles fell to Mrs. Decker. She was not quite as pretty as the actress she replaced, nor as young; but she brought to these parts experience and a good voice. On the first of July, Mr. Decker made one of his rare appearances, singing "Mount Vernon . . . in the character of an officer."³⁶ He had been, for many years, the musical director and orchestra leader of the company; and he had, this season, written all new music for La Foret Noire, probably because the original music had not been procurable.

The season was a long one for a town as small as Norfolk. It lasted from early May until late in September, and there were many changes in personnel of the company during that time. The Sullys were the first to leave. Mr. Sully, Sr. was last mentioned in the program for May sixteenth.³⁷ He must have left shortly afterwards to join Ricketts Circus; for he appeared in the circus in Boston before the month was out.³⁸ The rest of the family left before the middle of June to join him in Philadelphia where Ricketts had constructed a

³⁵ Sonneck, Concert Life in America, 63.

³⁶ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, August 10, 1795.

³⁷ Ibid., May 16, 1795.

³⁸ Greenwood, The Circus, 69.

building to house his circus.³⁹

The Picks left, to appear next in Boston.⁴⁰ Mrs. Pick's place was taken temporarily by Mrs. Decker and later, by Mrs. Pendergast.⁴¹ This lady could hardly have been as ponderous as her name; for she played such parts as Columbine, Miss Dazzle, and Kitty Sprightly. She also danced the hornpipe. Mr. McGrath joined the company in the middle of the season, but was off on a tour of his own when the company moved to Richmond in the fall. The Mariotts rejoined the company in July. After leaving Mr. West in Charleston, they had played for a short season in New York and Philadelphia with the Old American Company.⁴² Mrs. Mariott appears to have been a pretty young thing with no particular talent who fancied herself an author. The following notice appeared in the Herald on the eighteenth of July:

Just published, price 1s 6d, and for sale at the Herald Printing Office, and at Hunters' Retail Book and Stationary Store,

A Farce in Two Acts

called

THE CHIMERA;

or Effusions of Fancy.

Written by Mrs. Mariott of the Virginia Company, and performed with universal applause at the theatre in New York and Philadelphia.⁴³

³⁹ Pollock, The Philadelphia Theatre, 314.

⁴⁰ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 272.

⁴¹ Spelled variously in the newspapers as Prendergast, Pendergast, and Panderkast.

⁴² Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 104-107.

⁴³ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, July 8, 1796.

It had, indeed, been performed in New York and Philadelphia, but only for Mrs. Harriott's benefits, where the choice of the play had been, as was customary, left to her. For her benefit in Norfolk, she offered her audience more of her work. After a production of Douglas came "The Rights of Man," which was written and spoken by Mrs. Harriott.⁴⁴ This was followed by a performance of her Chimera.

Another actor who was also an author -- at least at his own benefits, was Mr. J. Kenna. For his benefit on August tenth, he offered the Clandestine Marriage, preceding which was "A Dissertation on Masonry by Brother J. Kenna."⁴⁵ After the Marseillaise Hymn, there followed a comedy written by J. Kenna and performed at his benefit in Charleston, called The Land of Liberty; or, A Trip to the Charleston Races. The program concluded with an "address, written and spoken by Mr. J. Kenna."⁴⁶ Although Mr. J. Kenna's literary efforts, like those of Mrs. Harriott, found presentation only at his own benefits, he did excel in acting. He lacked the warmth, the spark of genius, which John Bignall had shown; and it was therefore, unfortunate for him that he fell heir to Bignall's parts. He was, however, a good actor, experienced in all the little tricks of comedy, and Mr. West had leaned heavily upon his support that year. His death, then, before

⁴⁴ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, August 12, 1795.

⁴⁵ Ibid., August 10, 1795.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

the end of the season,⁴⁷ was a severe blow to Mr. West and seriously weakened the company.

The company was furthered weakened at the end of the season, by the departure of Mr. Hamilton for Boston.⁴⁸ He had come from Dublin to join West and Bignall and had stayed with the Virginia Company for four years. During those years, he had proved himself a steady, capable actor, excelling in the parts of crotchety, irascible old men of comedy. Casting for the Richmond season was no doubt difficult without him.

Thomas Wade West, beset by difficulties during his entire life in America handled them so well that they were not readily apparent. At the end of the 1795 season, with many of his strongest actors gone, the company had less to offer than in previous seasons. With the death of Mr. J. Kenna, "poor Shetty is gone" once more. The Sullys were gone, and Mrs. Pick, and the tumbling Signor Joseph Doctor, leaving the company short in music and in entr'acte "posteurs and equilibriums." Without Mrs. J. West,⁴⁹ Mrs. Pick, Mr. J. Kenna, or Mr. Hamilton, Thomas Wade West, to his own satisfaction, could not cast the old favorites among the plays. His answer to this problem

⁴⁷ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 320.

⁴⁸ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 303.

⁴⁹ Mrs. J. West's name does not appear again until the early months of 1797. There is no mention of her name in connection with other theatres on the continent during this period of a little over a year. This absence might best be explained by illness; for her husband continued to play with the company, and she herself returned to it.

was to bring the French dancers from Charleston. By the end of August, M. Francesque "from the Opera House, Paris"⁵⁰ and Madame Val were featured as dancers on the Norfolk programs. The Richmond casts featured M. Val, Dubois, Lette, and Francesque as well as Madame Val. Since Mr. West could not cast the old favorites to his satisfaction, he offered his audiences something entirely different. As he could not, at the moment, secure the best actors for them, he offered them the best dancers. The French were an excellent group of dancers,⁵¹ but it must have been a difficult problem to plan a season of plays with a company so heavily weighted with actors who were unable, because of lack of facility with the language, to take part in the usual English dramas.

Mr. West was faced with still another problem this season. After Mrs. West's benefit, which was to have been Norfolk's last performance for the year, and after most of the scenery and costumes had been packed away, he discovered that yellow fever was raging in Manchester,⁵² across the river from Richmond. Rather than expose himself and his company to the dangers of too close proximity to this dread disease, he remained in Norfolk, offering, on September seventh, the same program which had been presented at Mrs. West's

⁵⁰ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, August 31, 1795.

⁵¹ Clapp, The Boston Stage, 51-52.

⁵² The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, September 7, 1795.

benefit.

The first program of the 1795 season in Richmond, dated October fourteenth, gave West's answer to the problem of presenting the best possible entertainment with a limited number of competent actors and a large group of French dancers. The play with which he opened the program was Otway's tragedy Venice Preserved.⁵³ This was a happy choice; for Mrs. West was probably the best actor in the company, and the part of Belvidera had long been one of her favorite roles. The part of Jaffier was played by Mr. Edgar who, in spite of his disputatious nature, his too great addiction to the bottle, and his general lack of dependability, was a competent actor. Full casts were not given in the advertisements, but there were two parts in Venice Preserved which might have been played by two of the Frenchmen in the company: Renault and Pierre. Whether the Frenchmen were used in the tragedy or not, the second part of the program was theirs. A "new comic ballet pantomime by Mr. Francesquay" was given in place of the usual English farce or comic opera. Mr. Francesquay called his pantomime Two Hunters and the Milk Maid; or, the Death of the Bear;⁵⁴ but it was based heavily upon Duni's opera Les Deux Chasseurs. Such apparent pilfering was, however, prevalent at this time; and when it called forth any comment, it was something such as:

⁵³ The Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, postscript, extra, October 14, 1795.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Your comedy I've read, my friend
 And like the half you pilfered best;
 But sure the drama you might mend;
 Take courage, man, and steal the rest.⁵⁵

Another vehicle for the French members of the company was The Bird Catcher, "under the supervision of M. Placide of Paris."⁵⁶ Monsieur Placide, who, on that same evening, danced on the tight rope while playing the violin, was the well known Alexander Placide, "first rope dancer to the King of France,"⁵⁷ who was to be prominent in southern theatre until his death in 1812.⁵⁸ He had come to this country in 1791.⁵⁹ Already well known in Europe,⁶⁰ he had brought with him an equally well known and excellent French dancer, who traveled and performed with him in Boston and New York, and later in Charleston under the name of Madame Placide. Ludlow tells us that they came to America to escape the unpleasantness occasioned by M. Douvill-

⁵⁵ The Theatrical Censor, 1806, 83.

⁵⁶ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 126.

⁵⁷ W. Stanley Hoole, The Ante-Bellum Charleston Stage (University, Alabama, 1946), 3.

⁵⁸ Alexander Placide was one of the managers of the Richmond Theatre in 1811, and it was on the night of his benefit that the theatre burned (December 26, 1811), killing seventy people, and completely destroying the building and all the theatrical properties that were in it. In a letter to the Courier (Charleston), January 4, 1812, he wrote, "I saved nothing . . . my music, scenery, wardrobes, everything fell a prey to the flames."

⁵⁹ Willis, The Charleston Theatre, 237.

⁶⁰ He had been with Astley's Circus in London and had danced at Sadler's Wells.

lers claim that he had a prior right to the affections of "Madame."⁶¹ The story, told to Ludlow by an old French actor who had known all the parties concerned, of the stormy reunion of these actors in Charleston several years later, no doubt contains more than a grain of truth. In the story,

Placide, having been informed of Duvillier's presence in Charleston, wrote him a note, wherein he stated that if he did not immediately leave the city, one of them would have to die. This so enraged Duvillier that he immediately went out to a store, purchased two French rapiers, had their points sharpened, and went forth in search of Placide. He met him in the street as he was coming from the theatre, having the lady on his arm. Duvillier immediately confronted Placide, and presenting the hilts of the swords, told him to take his choice, and defend himself. The latter did so, and like a flash of lightning at it they went, in the most public street of Charleston. The lady screamed and fainted; the passers-by at once interfered, and the two were separated, Placide having received a stab in the side, but not a dangerous one. Two days after that, Duvillier and the lady were not to be found, and nothing was heard of them for many months, when they were both then known to be in New Orleans.⁶²

Unexplained in this story is the cast of the Deserter, given in Charleston at the French theatre on June 12, 1794, which included Placide, Madame Placide, Duvillier, and Madame Duvillier.⁶³

In the fall of 1795, Mrs. Fownell and her twin daughters, Mary and Caroline Wrihten made their first appearances in Charleston.⁶⁴ In June, they appeared in a benefit for the French pantomimist,

⁶¹ W. M. Ludlow, Dramatic Life as I Found It (Saint Louis, 1880), 148.

⁶² Ludlow, Dramatic Life as I Found It, 149.

⁶³ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, 281-82.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 295.



PLATE 6

ALEXANDER PLACIDE, FROM AN ENGRAVED PORTRAIT

M. Douvillier. On the third of August, Caroline eloped with Alexander Placide, leaving her mother so prostrate from grief and disgrace that she felt incapable of giving the farewell concert which had been advertised in the papers. She printed a card in the newspapers, saying

that from an unforeseen and unnatural change which has taken place in her family she is rendered totally incapable of appearing this evening; she, therefore, declines giving the entertainment at Williams' and requests those persons who have bought tickets to return them to her at Mr. Rogers' in Broad Street and receive their money.⁶⁵

On the twenty-seventh of September of the year 1795, Monsieur and Madame Douvillier gave their first performance in Norfolk. Madame Douvillier was described then as "the late Madame Placide, being her first appearance on this stage."⁶⁶ It was that lady, then, who was the Madame Placide in 1795 when Alexander was performing on the tight-rope in Richmond.

Mr. Bartlett was another addition to the company. He was one of the company secured by Mr. Powell in England for the first season of the Boston theatre.⁶⁷ One of the Boston critics said of him that first season, that he was new to the stage, young, extremely modest, and knew his parts.⁶⁸ He was accorded a benefit on the twenty-eighth of December. Unfortunately for him, this date fell during a cold

⁶⁵ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 296.

⁶⁶ The Herald (Norfolk), September 27, 1796.

⁶⁷ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 228.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 237-38.

spell, but the newspaper advertisements tempted the prospective audience by assuring them that stoves would be provided.⁶⁹

The season was longer than usual, running into January of 1796. Mr. West had advertised in the Charleston papers that the season there would begin in January, but the company appears to have stopped on the way for a short season in Norfolk; and they did not arrive in South Carolina until February.⁷⁰

After the capitulation of the French theatre in 1794, which had followed a season of out-throat competition, Mr. Sollee and Mr. West seem to have cooperated fully; and both men benefited by the arrangement. The French dancers and pantomimists had come to Mr. West's rescue in Norfolk at the end of the summer. Now a number of the actors who had played with the Virginia Company in Richmond went over to work, for the Charleston season, with Mr. Sollee. These included Mr. and Mrs. Jones, Mr. Bartlett, and Mr. Nelson.⁷¹ These players had all been members of the disbanded Boston Theatre Company. Other actors

⁶⁹ The Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, December 28, 1795.

⁷⁰ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 320.

⁷¹ Seilhamer, not having access to Virginia papers, believed that John Sollee brought these players direct from Boston to make up his Charleston troupe. From the additional cast, which we now possess, it seems more likely that these actors were a part of a large company or pool from which Mr. West and Mr. Sollee both drew. The entire group played in the larger towns such as Charleston and Norfolk. At other times, it was broken down into smaller groups which, under Edgar or Hamilton or Placide or West, played from Baltimore to Savannah, even touching such small towns as Fayetteville, North Carolina and Dumfries and Suffolk Court House in Virginia.

from the Boston company who now performed at the City Theatre under John Sollee, included Mr. Heeley, and Mrs. Hellyer. To this group were added Mr. and Mrs. Turnbull, Mr. and Mrs. Watts, Mr. and Mrs. King, and Gottlieb Graupner, the leader of the orchestra.⁷² At the end of the season, the entire group joined Mr. West. The only names found on Sollee's casts which do not also appear on the Norfolk casts are those of Mr. and Mrs. Collins and Mr. Hipworth.⁷³ That so many actors would join Mr. West at this time, seems to have been the result of prearranged planning rather than the last minute hiring of unemployed actors.

As already noted, at the end of the 1794 season in Charleston, Mr. Sollee had advertised in the newspapers that he and Mr. West were joining hands. Since that date, there seems to have been a large company or pool of actors from which either man could draw. This large company split into small units to bring dramas or vocal and instrumental concerts to communities too small to support either a large company or elaborate productions. The group then reassembled to bring the best in theatre to those towns which were large enough to afford it. Several examples of this splitting and reassembling have been noted and there were many more.

⁷²Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 280.

⁷³ Mr. Patterson had died during the Charleston season, as had Mrs. Pownall and Mary Wrighten. Charlotte Wrighten had married Alexander Flacide.

On the third of May, Mr. Sollee's company apparently disbanded.⁷⁴ Most of the company, however, joined Mr. West and finished the Charleston season with him. The Sollee actors who are missing from West's casts, with the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Collins and Mr. Hipworth, had formed a temporary group of their own and were giving a vocal and instrumental concert.⁷⁵ The players who advertised a concert at the New Theatre in Norfolk, a theatre which belonged to Mrs. West, were Graupner, Sacchirine, Bartlett, McGrath, Watts, and Heeley.⁷⁶ There was also Mrs. Bellier, who, having married the orchestra leader in Charleston, was appearing as Mrs. Graupner.⁷⁷ The concert, once it was prepared, had in all probability, been given in many smaller towns as the players traveled toward Norfolk, where they were to play with the company as a whole again.

The program announcing this concert warned that "No persons of color will be admitted to any part of the house."⁷⁸ A similar notice had been appended to Mr. Sollee's advertisements in Charleston during the 1795 season. It was explained in Charleston by a "regulation of the Common Council,"⁷⁹ but no such regulation existed in Norfolk at

⁷⁴ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 284.

⁷⁵ American Gazette (Norfolk), May 31, 1796.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 304.

⁷⁸ American Gazette (Norfolk), May 31, 1796.

⁷⁹ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 286.

this time. The New Theatre, when used by the Wests, had welcomed in the past, and was to welcome again in the future, all who paid the price of admission.⁸⁰ This policy of the Graupners and their fellow performers, which was a carry-over from their recent Charleston experience, was not followed by any similar notice for many years.

Mr. West informed the public of Norfolk and Portsmouth that the theatre would open on the fourth of July with Beaux Stratagem and the comic opera No Song No Supper. The company was a large one, made up of the comedians with which he had finished the Charleston season, together with the group of actors who had preceded him to Virginia, giving the concerts on the way. There were, in addition, Mr. and Mrs. Hogg. John Hogg was a large,⁸¹ handsome man⁸² who was at his best when playing the parts of comic old men. He therefore filled creditably the position left vacant by the departure of Mr. Hamilton. He was at that time only twenty-six years old, having been born in Scho, London, on the sixteenth of September, 1770.⁸³ His wife was much older than he, having made her debut, as a child actor, three years before he was born. She was the former Ann Storer, the second of the three Storer

⁸⁰ Ann Bitson, A Poetical Picture of America, Being Observations made during a Residence of Several Years, at Alexandria, and Norfolk, in Virginia (London, 1809), 142.

⁸¹ Thespian Mirror, 22.

⁸² Brown, History of the American Stage, 178.

⁸³ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 315.

sisters, all of whom had been known, from their association with John Henry (Lewis Hallam's partner in the Old American Company in Richmond in 1786), as Mrs. Henry.⁸⁴

There were others of the manager's large family on the stage that season also. To the now familiar J. West, T. West, and Miss West, there was added W. West and Master West. Another addition to the company, during its stay in Richmond in the fall of 1795, was J. William Green.⁸⁵ He had been brought to America in 1793 and had played until this season in Philadelphia and New York;⁸⁶ but the remainder of his life was to be spent, almost entirely, in the south.⁸⁷

The season of 1796 in Norfolk is an interesting one. There was a continued stress on pantomimes instead of the English operas for afterpieces. There were three new pantomimes; The Return of the Laborers and French Vauxhall Gardens, and two which had proved popular in former productions. A column-long description of Don Juan, presented on the twentieth of July, tempted lovers of spectacle to attend that very popular pantomime:

⁸⁴ Dunlap, History of the Theatre, 29.

⁸⁵ J. William Green was, with Alexander Placide and William Twaits, one of the managers of the Richmond Theatre on the night that it burned, December 26, 1811. Mr. Green's own daughter was one of those lost in the fire. He, however, appeared again on the stage in Richmond during its first season after the fire and the war of 1812.

⁸⁶ Wood, Personal Recollections of the Stage (Philadelphia, 1866), 186-87.

⁸⁷ See Appendix IV.



PLATE 9

A WATERCOLOR OF NORFOLK FROM CITY POINT,
WHERE THE RICKETTS AND SULLY CIRCUSES WERE HELD,
BY BENJAMIN HENRY LATROBE

DON JUAN;

or, The Libertine Destroyed.

This singular performance with Don Juan, whose character is that of the most daring and hardened libertine, fearless of vengeance, human or divine. His first intrigue is to seduce the betrothed mistress of his friend and the commandant's daughter ANNA with a serenade etc., etc. In disguise, he slays the lover and murders the commandant. After he escapes to the seaside; a beautiful view of a ship riding at anchor -- she puts out to sea. The Libertine and his man Scaramuch are crossing the ocean when

A Violent Storm Arises

In which the ship becomes a wreck and Juan is cast on shore. When faint and near exhaustion, two fishermen compassionating his situation, raise him and kindly support him to their cottage and refresh him. Scaramuch is now seen floating over the waves on the back of a Dolphin. Don Juan, though the very elements combine against him for the enormity of his crimes, is not deterred from farther wickedness; he seduces the fisherwoman and murders the father. A pursuit of justice causes him to fly, when meeting with a set of innocent rustic villagers celebrating a country wedding, he decoys the bride during the wedding and carries her off.

Act II

Commence with the Libertine returned to the City

An Equestrian Statue

"To the Memory of the Late Commandant" Hardened in villany, he repents not, although there instantly appears in letters of blood on the pedestal

"By thee I fell; thy fate's decreed --
Heaven will avenge the bloody deed."

At length, the statue, nodding as it were at such monstrous wickedness -- Scaramuch sees it and terrified at such phenomena informs his master who in seeming disdain, challenges the Statue to give him a meeting at the banquet, where he next appears in scenes of dissipation and riot -- Dreadful and uncommon noise surround the tavern, all is thrown into confusion, the women fly and the Statue, entering seats himself with Don Juan at a table, who with unprecedented daring asks it to eat and drink but it refused.

The Statue then after asking Don Juan to sup with him at twelve o'clock in the place where his murdered remains lie, goes off, and DON JUAN after giving some orders to Scaramuch, follows into a Dismal Cave with Monuments, bones etc., where an awful scene of expostulation takes place; but the ghost finding all his entreaty to repentance useless -- he seizes him and casts him to the ground -- Scene changes to the FIERY ABYSS, SUDDEN FLAMES OF FIRE etc. Fear and remorse seize him and he tries to escape but in vain, as the fires meet him at every turn. He kneels with fear and horror and supplicates Pluto for mercy; this being denied to the

abandoned Libertine, as a wretch void of all pity, he falls to the ground and becomes prey to irrefutable fate. The furies gather round, and the tyrant being bound in chains, is hurried away amidst a shower of fire and thrown into the flames.

Thus ends one of the finest MORALS, and grandest spectacles ever exhibited in any theatre.⁸⁸

The advertisement promised, also, "All new scenery and machinery."⁸⁹

The fire and flames were simulated by fireworks⁹⁰ which were real enough to cause minor burns to the clothing and person of the actor playing the part of Don Juan.⁹¹

The musical The Recruit, written by Mr. Turnbull,⁹² appeared to be an enlargement of the interlude of the same name, which he had performed at his benefit during the Charleston season that year.⁹³ Gavin Turnbull was a poet as well as an actor and playwright. His poetry appeared in the newspapers from time to time; and enough subscriptions were collected to publish a book of his poems in Petersburg in 1797.⁹⁴ Gavin Turnbull was a Scotsman, coming to this country from Edinburg,⁹⁵ and seven of the pieces in his book were in Scottish

⁸⁸ The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser, June 10, 1795.

⁸⁹ American Gazette (Norfolk), July 19, 1796.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ludlow, Dramatic Life As I Found It, 147.

⁹² American Gazette (Norfolk), July 29, 1796.

⁹³ Seidhamer, History of the American Theatre, 11, 287.

⁹⁴ The Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, June 10, 1797.

⁹⁵ The Norfolk Herald, July 4, 1796.

dialect.⁹⁶

The ever popular Highland Reel was given again on the twenty-fourth of August.⁹⁷ This time, the part of Shelty was played by Mr. Frimmore, "a gentleman of some vanity and little merit, whose opinion of himself was in an inverse proportion to that of the public."⁹⁸ As a man, he seems to have been uniformly disliked;⁹⁹ but as an actor, he must have had some ability or he would not have been accorded such parts as Shelty¹⁰⁰ and Iago.¹⁰¹

Another addition to the company was Miss Wall, the daughter of Thomas Wall, who had been the manager of the first post-war theatre in America and a member of Ryan's American Company which had brought drama back to Virginia after the Revolution. Miss Wall was probably twenty-four or twenty-five years of age, it being fourteen years since her first appearance on the stage; and it is surprising to find her still unmarried. Her father was still alive. In collaboration with Mr. and Mrs. Douglass, he was giving entertainments in the small towns of North Carolina.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ The Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, January, 31, 1797.

⁹⁷ American Gazette (Norfolk), August 23, 1796.

⁹⁸ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 47.

⁹⁹ Ibid., III, 48, 66, 68.

¹⁰⁰ American Gazette (Norfolk), August 23, 1796.

¹⁰¹ The Norfolk Herald, August 26, 1796.

¹⁰² Playbill, Newbern and Edenton, N. C., Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., October 12, 1791.

While new recruits kept joining the company during the season, there were also many who left it. Mr. McGrath took a small company to Alexandria where they played from the middle of July to the middle of August.¹⁰³ After the annual benefit for the poor,¹⁰⁴ on the twenty-third of September,¹⁰⁵ the company changed radically. Mr. Edgar took a large group with which he played in such small Virginia towns as Dumfries and Suffolk Court House.¹⁰⁶ His company, which seems to have remained a part of the larger company, included Watts, Edgar, King, Eady, Evans, Furnell, and Bignall as well as Mrs. Edgar, Mrs. King, and Mrs. Landberry.¹⁰⁷

The loss of so many of the foremost players in Norfolk at that time was counteracted, to some extent, by the arrival of Monsieur Douvillier and his wife. Madame Douvillier, tall and commanding in her bearing, with fine hair and eyes, splendid bust and beautifully rounded figure,¹⁰⁸ was "the late Madame Placide,"¹⁰⁹ who had played in

¹⁰³ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 192.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 187.

¹⁰⁵ The Norfolk Herald, September 23, 1796.

¹⁰⁶ Playbill from Suffolk Court House, October 12, 1796, owned by Colonial Williamsburg, Inc.

¹⁰⁷ Mr. King and Mrs. Watts are not listed on the one existing playbill for Suffolk Court House; but since their names do not appear on the Norfolk programs at this time, it may be assumed that they accompanied their marital partners.

¹⁰⁸ Ludlow, Dramatic Life As I Found It, 146-47.

¹⁰⁹ The Norfolk Herald, September 27, 1796.

Richmond the preceding fall. For their initial performance, a French ballet pantomime The Generous Soldier and the Two Thieves was given.¹¹⁰ As the pièce de résistance, the pantomime included a "broad sword combat."¹¹¹ Monsieur Douvillier was, no doubt, an accomplished swordsman on the stage as well as in the streets of Charleston.

The Norfolk season of 1796 closed on the thirteenth of October, and the company moved to Richmond.¹¹² It had been a good season with a large number of competent and experienced actors, although there had been no exceptionally brilliant actors among them. Some of the more interesting entr'acte pieces of the season were the comic song "The Players of Our Own Days,"¹¹³ "The Tobacco Box,"¹¹⁴ and the perennial favorite "Poor Old Woman of Eighty."¹¹⁵ There were, also, "Serio-comic Dissertation on Taxation by Mr. Edgar"¹¹⁶ and "The Italian Shades; or the Art of Magic" offered by Monsieur Douvillier.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ The Norfolk Herald, September 27, 1796.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² The first advertisement available for Richmond this year is dated November 30, 1796, but it does not appear to be the first one of the season.

¹¹³ The Norfolk Herald, September 12, 1796.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., September 16, 1796.

¹¹⁶ American Gazette (Norfolk), September 20, 1796.

¹¹⁷ The Norfolk Herald, September 27, 1796.

The Richmond season of 1796 was shorter, the casts smaller, and the plays a repetition of the Norfolk season. Don Juan was repeated on November thirtieth with the same new scenery, machinery, and fireworks, under the direction of Mr. T. West.¹¹⁸ The theatre, even when there were stoves provided, must have seemed a less inviting place in December than in the warmer months; and that year the cold was more intense than was usual. From the nineteenth of December through Christmas, a storm raged with high winds and freezing temperatures.¹¹⁹ The harbor at Norfolk filled with crippled ships; and in Richmond, the bridge which linked that city with Manchester, was carried away by ice.¹²⁰ Mrs. Green found it necessary to inform her friends and the public in general that her benefit, because of the inclemency of the weather, had been postponed.¹²¹

The advertisement for this benefit is the first mention of Mrs. Green, who like her husband, was to be familiar to Virginia audiences for many years. She had appeared first as Miss Willems¹²² in Philadelphia in 1794; and she continued to play in the same company with

¹¹⁸ The Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, November 30, 1796.

¹¹⁹ "Journal of Cuthbert Powell," William and Mary Quarterly, 1st ser., XIII (1906), 54-55.

¹²⁰ The Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, January 20, 1797.

¹²¹ The Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, January 4, 1797.

¹²² This name is given variously as Williams and Willems.



PLATE 10

VIEW OF RICHMOND FROM THE BANKS OF THE JAMES RIVER IN 1796
FROM A WATERCOLOR BY BENJAMIN HENRY LATROBE

J. William Green until their marriage in June of 1796.¹²³ Fope Green had a sweet singing voice, was an acceptable actress, and had a personal charm which endeared her to her audiences.¹²⁴ Her benefit which, because of the inclemency of the weather, had been postponed until January fourth in 1797, brought an end to the Richmond season.

1796 undoubtedly slipped into another year for Thomas Wade West, leaving no line of demarkation, no moment in which to pause to tally up his accomplishments for the past two years. He had, none the less, two outstanding accomplishments to his credit. Another brick theatre had been built in Norfolk and a second built in Charleston. The Norfolk theatre seems to have been in Margaret West's name from the beginning. It was probably her money, in addition to public subscription, which had paid for the theatre; but Thomas Wade West, no doubt, had a hand in the planning of it.

On March 30, 1796, he had obtained a deed from John Grayson, merchant, for a piece of property on the north side of Bank Street in Petersburg, for the purpose of erecting a playhouse.¹²⁵ In April of the same year, he made contracts with a number of well-known Petersburg men. These shareholders in the future theatre were to receive

¹²³ Seilhamer, History of the American Theatre, II, 162-63, 208.

¹²⁴ The Norfolk Herald, July 19, 1800.

¹²⁵ Wyatt, "Three Petersburg Theatres," William and Mary Quarterly, 2d ser., XXI (1941), 88.

five per cent interest on their investment and a box ticket to every performance except the benefits.¹²⁶ This theatre, eighty-five feet long and forty-five feet wide, containing stage, upper and lower boxes, pit, proper offices and two dressing rooms under the stage, was to cost one thousand pounds.¹²⁷ The decorations for the theatre, which were to cost three hundred pounds, were done during the summer by Luke Robbins, who had done the scenery for the Philadelphia theatre.¹²⁸ This theatre, then, about which so much of the 1797 season was to center, was finished during 1796; and West might well have chalked it up as one of the major accomplishments of the year.

He had also made great progress toward his goal of providing the best possible theatre to the greatest possible audience and at the same time providing year around employment for the actors of his company. These two objectives went hand in hand. The best in theatrical productions required adequate playhouses, which he attempted to provide in the larger cities (Richmond, Charleston, Norfolk, Petersburg, and Alexandria) and a large company of outstanding actors. The greatest possible audience in the South could only be reached by playing in many towns too small to afford either large playhouses or large acting companies. By 1796, Thomas Wade West had found a very

¹²⁶ Wyatt, "Three Petersburg Theatres," William and Mary Quarterly, 2d ser., XXI (1941), 88.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 90.

satisfactory answer to this problem. He had assembled a large and excellent acting company, to whom he offered year around employment. The company as a whole could bring to an audience the best in variety and excellence of acting, in dancing, vocal and instrumental music, scenery, machinery, and costumes, and even entr'acte novelties; but there were few theatres large enough to hold an audience capable of paying for so much talent. The company, then, was periodically split up. Individuals went out in twos or threes to give concerts. Small companies played short engagements in taverns in Savannah in Georgia; New Bern, Edenton, Fayetteville, and Wilmington in North Carolina; and Dumfries and Suffolk Court House in Virginia. Undoubtedly there were many other small towns also, whose playbills are now lost, which had a taste of drama from the hands of one of the contingents of the Virginia Company. With this arrangement, it was possible for the small, temporary companies to look to the parent company for theatrical supplies -- for playscripts, which were often unpublished and difficult to procure, musical arrangements, costumes, properties, machines, and some scenery. Under the superior management of Thomas Wade West, both actors and the physical accoutrements of drama were kept in action throughout the year.

CHAPTER VIII

Building of the Alexandria Theatre

Latrobe's Plans for Another Theatre in Richmond

Burning of the Richmond Theatre

Death of Thomas Wade West

CHAPTER VIII

The 1797 season of the Virginia Company centered, in the main, about Petersburg with its new theatre. In Petersburg, a small town on the fall line of the Appomattox River, life revolved about the river-side warehouses and magazines in which tobacco was gathered, graded, and stored. Sloops, schooners, and small vessels continually sailed up to these warehouses and loaded tobacco for trade abroad.¹

Petersburg was first in America in the tobacco trade; but however prosperous it was, it was none the less an unhealthy town.² Built in the middle of a swamp between two hills, the town was so unhealthy as to make current the saying that "a child was never raised to the age of manhood" in it.³ There were two main streets, consisting entirely of stores. The houses, all of wood, were scattered about in an irregular pattern.⁴

For the people of Petersburg, public entertainment had become, as in other southern towns, an integral part of their lives. They could now boast two parks, a race course, and two theatres.⁵ The new

¹ Thomas Anturey, Travels through the Interior Parts of America (London, 1791).

² Hunter, Quebec to Carolina, 259-60.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Arthur Syle Davis, Three Centuries of An Old Virginia Town, reprinted from the Magazine of History, 1914.

theatre opened on Wednesday evening, the eighteenth of January with the comedy Dramatist and the farce of the Irishman in London.⁶ With the opening of the theatre, the Virginia Company plunged so deeply into the life of the town that few residents could have remained unaware of them. In addition to the performances, which were described at length in the newspapers, there were the advertisements of F. Shaw, "of the theatre"⁷ who offered to give lessons in "singing, harpsichord, German flute, etc."⁸ Mr. Shaw, whose wife and son appeared as actors in the casts of the Virginia Company, was himself a member of the orchestra. An enterprising gentleman, he also gave lessons and sold "music, German flutes, violin strings, etc."⁹ Gavin Turnbull is another of the players whose name must have become familiar to the residents of Petersburg; for the newspapers carry a number of his poems in addition to the notice of the publication of his book.¹⁰

The plays that season were too numerous to mention. Some of them were, never-the-less, worth special attention for the insight they give us in regard to the ways of the theatre in the community of which it was a part. There was, for instance, an interesting note at

⁶ Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, January 17, 1797.

⁷ Ibid., January 12, 1797.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., January 31, February 7, 1797.

the foot of the printed program for the night of January twenty-fifth which announced, "No people of color admitted to the boxes."¹¹ This would seem to indicate that colored people were not segregated within the pit (there was no gallery in this theatre) and that they had been known to purchase box tickets and take their seats there. The program for February seventeenth showed again the French influence which was still prevalent. On this evening School for Scandal was offered with the farce The Midnight Hour, "translated from the French Guerre Overtre ou Ruse Contre Ruse."¹²

There is mention throughout the season of "new scenery, dresses, and decorations."¹³ These reached a climax when, on the twenty-eighth of February, "Mr. Robins, Scene Painter"¹⁴ was accorded the unusual privilege of a benefit performance. Luke Robins, it will be remembered, had been engaged to decorate the new theatre. He now remained with the company as scene designer. Occasionally, he also sang a comic song between the play and the farce. A very tall young man with a large frame, Dunlap recalls him as wearing a gold-laced collar and three gold hat bands. For his benefit, Mr. Robins offered Macbeth, all of the settings and decorations being "entirely new for this

¹¹ Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, January 24, 1797.

¹² Ibid., February 17, 1797.

¹³ Ibid., February 21, 1797.

¹⁴ Ibid., February 28, 1797.

occasion,"¹⁵ and the pantomime Robinson Crusoe, for which the scenery was "new -- designed and executed by Mr. Robins." We can be sure that Mr. Robins had lately been a very busy man; for the scenes listed below each consisted of a large back drop and matching wings. Some also necessitated mechanical ships or savages in canoes.

The Cauldron and Witches Dance.
 Banquet in celebration of Macbeth's accession
 to the throne.
 Habitation of Robinson Crusoe principally a
 collection from the wreck.
 Bower, enclosure for goats -- a distant view of
 the sea.
 View of the sea, Savages passing and repassing
 in canoes.
 View of a ship at anchor -- his embarkation etc.¹⁶

The last and best night of the season was, as usual, reserved for the benefit of Mrs. West. On this occasion, the tragedy Irelian Daughter was given with the pantomime Devil on Two Sticks, "taken from La Diable Boiteau of La Sage."¹⁷ After this performance, which would have required the entire complement, the company seems to have gone through the splitting up process which had become characteristic of it. The more musical members, which included the Shaws and the Deckers, together with Mr. Bartlett, Mr. Lotus, Duval, and Mr. Robins, gave concerts in Petersburg, Richmond, and Norfolk.¹⁸ On March first

¹⁵ Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, February 28, 1797.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., March 7, 1797.

¹⁸ The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, April 3, April 15, 1797; Sonneck, Concert Life in America, 61.

they gave a concert at the Eagle Tavern in Richmond.¹⁹ The fact that only one concert seems to have been given in Richmond is no doubt due to the smallpox epidemic which had reached such alarming proportions before the end of the month that the Common Hall authorized general inoculations.²⁰ We do not know where they went when they left Richmond; but on April third, they gave "Selections of Sacred Music" at the theatre in Norfolk.²¹ This met with enough success to encourage the musicians to repeat their performance in a "Divine Concert"²² which they gave at the Town Hall on the twentieth of April.

There were other members of the company appearing in Charleston during March,²³ and there were doubtless still others playing in the small towns of Virginia and North Carolina. A part of the company reopened the Petersburg theatre on April twenty-seventh and played there until the eighth of May.²⁴ Where they were between the eighth and the twenty-ninth of May, we do not know, but on the twenty-ninth, the Petersburg theatre reopened for the "race week," playing every night rather than the usual three times a week.²⁵ The J. Wests had

¹⁹ Sonneck, Concert Life in America, 61.

²⁰ Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, February 3, 1797.

²¹ The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, April 3, 1797.

²² Ibid., April 15, 1797.

²³ Sonneck, Concert Life in America, 36-37.

²⁴ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 191.

²⁵ Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, May 26, 1797.

rejoined the company by that time, Mrs. J. West being described as "the late Mrs. Bignall."²⁶

At the end of the race week, the company moved to Norfolk where their season lasted until the fifth of August. The programs, which contained some items of special interest, began with Mr. Ashton's benefit, which was concluded with an "Eulogium on Freemasonry by Brother Ashton."²⁷ It is interesting to note how heavily the comedians among the Masons drew upon the support and patronage of their brothers for their benefit performances.²⁸ Mr. Ashton is the fourth Mason we have noted who appealed to his brothers in this way, and there are others who followed him in this practice.

Another program of interest was Mrs. Green's benefit for which was presented the play Mountaineers "for the last time this season,"²⁹ and a farce altered from the Mogul Tale, called The Norfolk Cobbler; or, the Descent of the Balloon. The Norfolk Cobbler was played by Javin Turnbull, his wife, by Hope Green.³⁰ "In the course of the play,

²⁶ Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, May 26, 1797.

²⁷ The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, June 26, 1797.

²⁸ Moreau de Saint Méry commented on the strength of the Masons in Norfolk.

²⁹ The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, July 8, 1797.

³⁰ From the following poem, printed in The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, on July 19, 1800, Mrs. Green's first name would seem to have been "Hope:"

a balloon descends upon the stage."³¹ Mrs. Ashton and Miss Cheucer sought to top this display by offering, in the afterpiece The Maid of the Oaks, a "back scene" which represented a "double transparent arch, beautifully illuminated, in front of which is a treble arch adorned with various wreaths of flowers, grapes, etc. heightened by one hundred variegated illuminations."³² Mr. Robins must have been a busy man.

Mrs. Shaw, who gave the next benefit performance, was assisted by her husband in a "concerto on the oboe."³³ She offered also, the play Fountainville Forest and the pantomime Jean De Saintre. The advertisement claimed for the pantomime its first production in America. The program was rounded out with "A Fricasee Dance by W. West and a young French gentleman"³⁴ and "An ancient combat with Axe and

Oh Hope, thou firm supporter of mankind,
 If, e'er thy rays, the meanest hath beguiled,
 Let me for once their influence partake
 And cherish Hope, for Green's for Merit's sake.
 Let me then Hope that all the powers above
 Will lend their aid on Man, next to prove,
 That worth in this free land will meet success,
 I cannot wish her more on Monday, than be seen
 As 'tis "The Benefit of Mrs. Green."

³¹ The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, July 8, 1797.

³² Ibid., July 13, 1797.

³³ Ibid., July 20, 1797.

³⁴ Ibid.

Dagger by Mr. Green and Mr. Ashton."³⁵

Christopher Charles McGrath was back again; but having joined the company late in the season, he was not accorded a benefit. Airing his discontent in the local papers, he prepared "An Evening's Regale" to be given at the Town Hall. This "Regale" consisted of "A Moral Defense of the Stage" and songs by Mr. Watts and Mr. Copeland, who were both members of the regular acting company.³⁶ On August fifth, this entertainment was repeated in Portsmouth.³⁷

The company next moved on to Fredericksburg where they played from the middle of August until the middle of October.³⁸ The cast of the Highland Reel, rings a familiar note; for the part of Shetty was played once again by Mr. Signall. This Mr. Signall is, of course, Isaac, who although an adequate and well trained actor, had not that spark of genius which set his brother apart. The Mrs. J. West who plays the part of Meggy M'Oilpin, however, is the same incomparable actress who, as Mrs. Signall, had shared her former husband's applause in the same play in 1794. No doubt the Highland Reel was given on the whole a very creditable performance; for Mr. West was as facile a director as manager. We can be sure also, that the acting of

³⁵ The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, July 20, 1797

³⁶ Ibid, July 27, 1797.

³⁷ Ibid., August 5, 1795.

³⁸ Sonneck, Early Opera in America, 188.

Moggy would have been difficult to match on the whole continent.

Sometime after the middle of October, 1797, the Virginia Company left Fredericksburg and traveled to Petersburg, where they again played every evening during race week.³⁹ The new Petersburg theatre was receiving maximum usage,⁴⁰ this season being the fourth there for the Virginia Company within a year. This fourth season seems to have been a successful one; for their week stretched from October twenty-seventh, when Hamlet, Prince of Denmark was given with the farce The Sultan; or, A Peep into the Seraglio,⁴¹ to November third, when their engagement seems to have ended with School for Scandal and the comic opera Patrick in Russia.⁴²

While the theatre thrived in Petersburg and Norfolk, in Richmond it did not grow as rapidly as might have been expected. Thomas Wade West, who was an excellent manager, was not one to play for long in any town where he was losing money; and Richmond, which had been his first choice of a location, lost its central position in his scheme and was left with a shorter season each year. Thus the 1798 theatrical

³⁹ Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, October 24, 1797.

⁴⁰ So small a community could obviously not support a permanent year-round theatre.

⁴¹ Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, October 27, 1797.

⁴² Ibid., November 3, 1797.

season began in Richmond, not in September or October as it had in former years, but in November. Mr. West also found it expedient to spend much less money on advertising in Richmond than he had spent in Petersburg or Norfolk. No long descriptions of plays were published in the newspapers, and no full casts were given. It seems evident, however, that he had not economized on personnel, but had brought the majority of the company to Richmond.⁴³ Aside from the fact that the need for a large company would be strongly felt in the overly large theatre there, the choice of plays tend to bear out this assumption. A case in point was the selection for the evening of November eighth, of As You Like It; or, Love in a Forest and the musical farce The Farmer; or, The World's Ups and Downs.⁴⁴ Although the only name mentioned in the advertisement was that of Mr. J. West who sang a song between the play and the farce, the majority of the company doubtless participated in the presentation of these plays. Neither As You Like It nor The Farmer would have lent themselves to the director's expedient, when faced with a small company; cutting and doubling and padding. In a tragedy, the crowds on stage may be cut to the bone without seriously injuring the performance; and those "lords and ladies of the court" who are deemed a minimum may be supplied by putting the stage

⁴³ The only actors we know, with a certainty, who were in Richmond at this time were Mr. J. West, whose name was mentioned in The Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, November 8, 1797, and Mrs. Green, mentioned by Benjamin Henry Latrobe in his Journal of Latrobe (New York, 1905), 84-85

⁴⁴ The Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, November 8, 1797.

carpenter and the doorkeeper in costume and commandeering any wives of the actors who were not normally listed as members of the cast. On the other hand, in a production of As You Like It, in its eighteenth century version,⁴⁵ or The Farmer, this would not have proved feasible. These plays demanded a full orchestra and large groups of people swirling about on the stage. The crowds in these plays had to be actors who could both sing and dance, otherwise the gay, effervescent quality of the production would have been lost. Thus we may say, in spite of the scarcity of evidence, that the 1797 season in Richmond was maintained on the same high level as those in Petersburg, Norfolk and Fredericksburg with the majority of the company participating. Thomas Wade West, in the meantime, contented himself with cutting down the length of the season and the amount of advertising he placed in the newspapers.

He appears to have diagnosed the source of his difficulty in Richmond; finding it the same as that under which Hallam and Henry had struggled in 1786 -- the Academy. This pseudo-theatre, planned by a gentleman, soldier, dancing-master with little or no experience in acting or directing on a stage and labeled an Academy, was probably

⁴⁵ Shakespeare's works were adapted to suit the tastes of the eighteenth century audiences by Dryden, Garrick, etc. Thus altered, the plays contained the songs, dances and processions so popular at that time. Romeo and Juliet thus ended with an elaborate funeral procession and the witches in Macbeth, singing their lines, were accompanied by a chorus of lesser witches. Hazelton Spencer's Shakespeare Improved (Cambridge, 1927) carries a full account of eighteenth century adaptations of Shakespeare.

not the workable type of theatre that an actor or a director might have desired. It was also, in spite of Richmond's rapid growth, too large. A barnlike frame building, begun in 1787, it seemed to invite prowlers who pilfered and destroyed the theatrical properties and costumes which were usually stored in it.⁴⁶ The situation had become so crippling by the fall of 1797 that Mr. West had been forced to remove the costumes to his own home and take only those needed in the evening's performance to the theatre each day.⁴⁷

It was at this time, when Mr. West was aggravated by the shortcomings of the theatre in which he was working, that he met the architect, Benjamin Henry Latrobe.⁴⁸ Latrobe had proved himself an outstanding architect and engineer in England before he came to America, where he disembarked at Norfolk on the twentieth of March in 1796.⁴⁹ He was a young man with a wholesome curiosity and active interest in everything that went on about him; and the challenge involved in the design of a building, the usefulness of which depended

⁴⁶ The Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, August 7, August 28, 1793; The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, February 1, 1798.

⁴⁷ The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, February 1, 1798.

⁴⁸ It is possible that Latrobe attended the theatre in Norfolk, and that he and West came to know one another at that time; but the designs for the new theatre in Richmond were not begun until December 2, 1798.

⁴⁹ Latrobe, The Journal of Latrobe, xiv.

upon so many restricting specifications, appealed to him.⁵⁰ Thus, on December 2, 1797, Benjamin Henry Latrobe began work on the "Designs of a Building proposed to be erected at Richmond in Virginia to Contain a Theatre, Assembly-Rooms, and a Hotel."⁵¹

The result was a plan for a community center, containing a large ballroom, several card rooms, a room for refreshments, all on one side; a hotel on the other, and in the middle, a theatre. The combination of theatre and hotel would have been convenient for those members of the audience who were visitors in Richmond during the sitting of the legislature, it would have provided a temporary home for the manager and his family if not for the entire company, and it would have given the theatre the protection from burglars it so sorely needed. The combination of the ballroom and the card rooms with the hotel was not an innovation; the eighteenth century "Long Room" having made the tavern a similar center of entertainment.

The theatre was a director's dream, designed as an actor or director might plan it, with a thorough knowledge of the backstage

⁵⁰ In Latrobe's "Designs of Buildings Erected or proposed to be Built in Virginia," he tells of designing a house on the bet that he could not design a building which would fulfill the limiting specifications which his companion proposed. Latrobe seems to have accepted the challenge gaily, surprising his friend when he presented the designs to him.

⁵¹ Benjamin Henry Latrobe Boneval, Architect and Engineer, "Designs of a Building proposed to be erected at Richmond in Virginia to Contain a Theatre, Assembly-Rooms, and a Hotel," a folio of sketches in the Library of Congress.

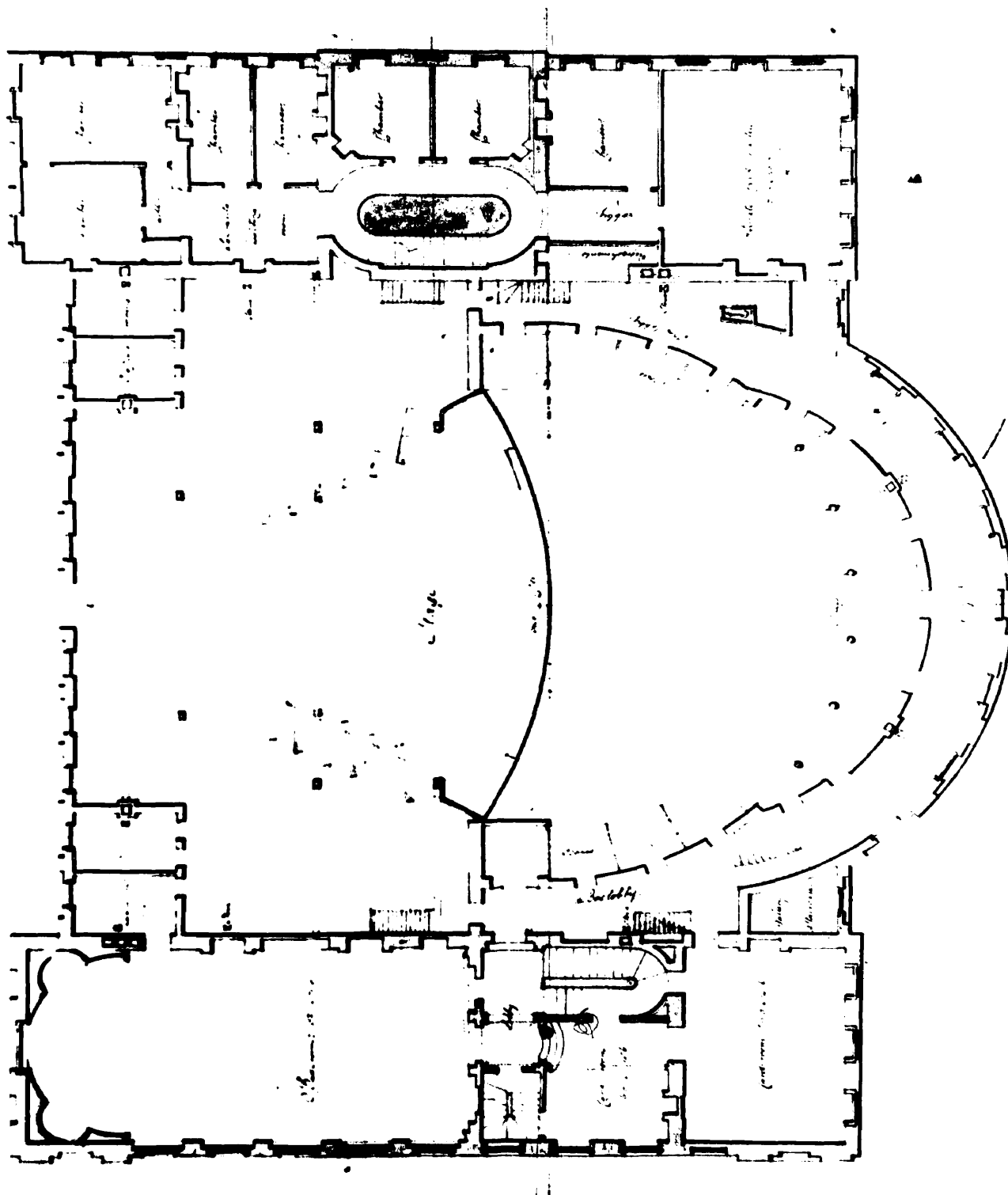


PLATE II

PLAN OF THE FIRST FLOOR, FROM "DESIGNS OF A THEATRE
 PROVIDED TO BE BUILT IN RICHMOND," BY WILLIAM HENRY LAYFORD

requirements for the best in theatrical production and his corresponding desire to create the most perfect illusion; and not as a box-keeper designs, with his head full of the figures of the number of seats multiplied by the price of admission. The stage area was equal to that reserved for the audience.⁵² The stage was deep enough to facilitate the creation of the illusion of storms, distant cataracts, erupting volcanoes, sinking ships and the like which were so popular at that time. It was wide enough for scenery or large numbers of people to be moved on and off stage from the wings with ease; and it was high enough to allow the numerous drop curtains to be flown out of sight when not in use.⁵³ On the other hand, the auditorium (no larger in area than the stage) seated only about six hundred and fifty people, a seating capacity of considerably less than that of the existing theatre which was said to have had, when it was constructed as Quesnay's Academy, sixteen hundred seats. This smaller theatre could have been filled completely on any special occasion⁵⁴ and sufficiently

⁵² See Plate 11, the ground plan of the proposed building which shows clearly the proportions of stage area to auditorium.

⁵³ Present day workers in the theatre would be pleased with as little as half the offstage space that was provided for in these designs. Few theatres today have as much off-stage space in which to manipulate and store scenery and properties.

⁵⁴ On the "special occasion" of a benefit on December 26, 1811, about seven hundred people crowded the theatre in Richmond, which was probably about the size of Latrobe's proposed theatre. That theatre also seems to have been more or less adequately filled every evening it was open, from its opening on January 31, 1808 until it was burned on the night of December 26, 1811. The size of the theatre in Latrobe's designs would therefore seem to have been well suited to the community.

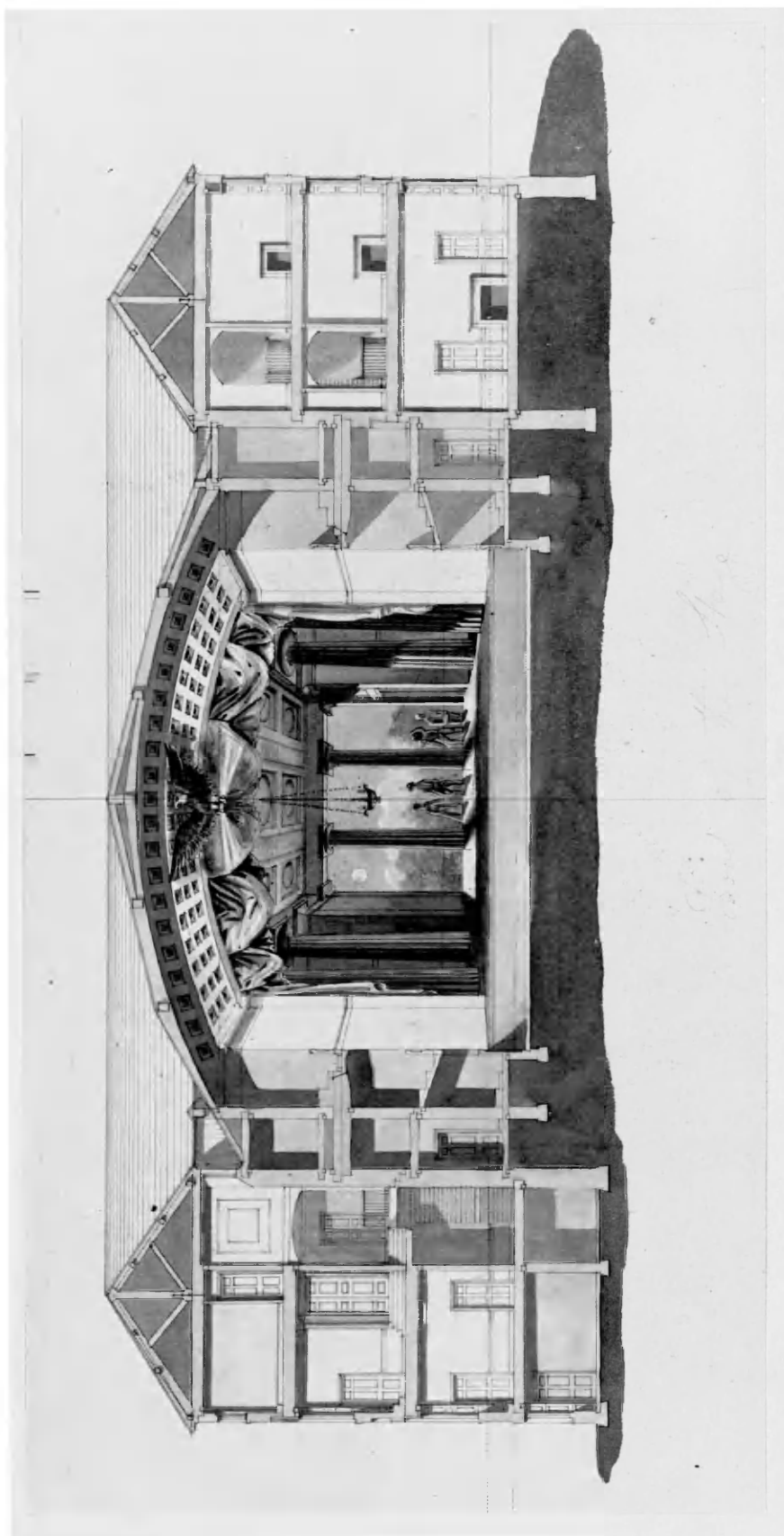


PLATE 12

FRONT OF THE STAGE, FROM "DESIGNS OF A THEATRE
PROPOSED TO BE BUILT IN RICHMOND," BY BENJAMIN HENRY LATROBE

filled on any evening to insure a festive feeling in the audience and an adequate tone of excitement among the actors. Latrobe's designs were, then, highly satisfactory in answer to all the specifications which an actor and manager of West's calibre would have deemed necessary.

It is possible, however, that West never really commissioned Latrobe to execute these designs — or, if he did, that he had any idea of building from them at that particular time. They may have been, for West, but a graphic representation of a dream; for Latrobe, a challenge accepted.

Thomas Wade West had so many irons in the fire at that time that it seems unlikely that a good manager, which he undoubtedly was, would have begun another project of such magnitude then. The new playhouse in Petersburg was not yet a year old, and the Alexandria theatre was even then in the process of being built.

Plans for the Alexandria playhouse had, no doubt, been evolving for some time; but they were first mentioned in the newspapers in January of 1797.⁵⁵ At this time, it was announced that "liberal subscriptions" had been filled by the "principal gentlemen of the town (on the solicitations of Mr. West, manager of the Virginia and

⁵⁵ An article with the dateline "Alexandria, January 21st" reprinted in the Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, February 3, 1797.

South Carolina Companys) for the building of an elegant theatre."⁵⁶ This building, on Cameron Street, opposite Gadsby's Tavern, was to be ninety feet by fifty feet in size and "inferior to few in the country for convenience, simple elegance and situation."⁵⁷ It had risen slowly during the year. The subscribers had met occasionally in Gadsby's Tavern and paid, with some prompting, the installments of their shares.⁵⁸ Although it was not now likely that it would be finished by December first, as had been promised at the first of the year,⁵⁹ it was to live up to all expectations as to convenience, elegance and situation.⁶⁰ This theatre, called Liberty Hall,⁶¹ was the fourth which Thomas Wade West had undertaken to build and the fifth under his control.

Latrobe finished his designs for the Richmond theatre on January 8, 1798; but if West had indeed planned to commence building immediately, his plans were soon to be rudely interrupted. The season

⁵⁶ Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, February 3, 1797.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ The Times and Alexandria Advertiser, September 2, 1797.

⁵⁹ Virginia Gazette, and Petersburg Intelligencer, February 3, 1797.

⁶⁰ W. B. Wood, in his Personal Recollections of the Stage (Philadelphia, 1865), 59, wrote of the Alexandria playhouse in 1804: "a very large and convenient theatre had been erected some years before for the accomodation of the Virginia Company."

⁶¹ Mary G. Powell, History of Old Alexandria, Virginia (Richmond, 1928), 142-43. Liberty Hall was the only playhouse in Alexandria until 1871, when it was destroyed by fire.

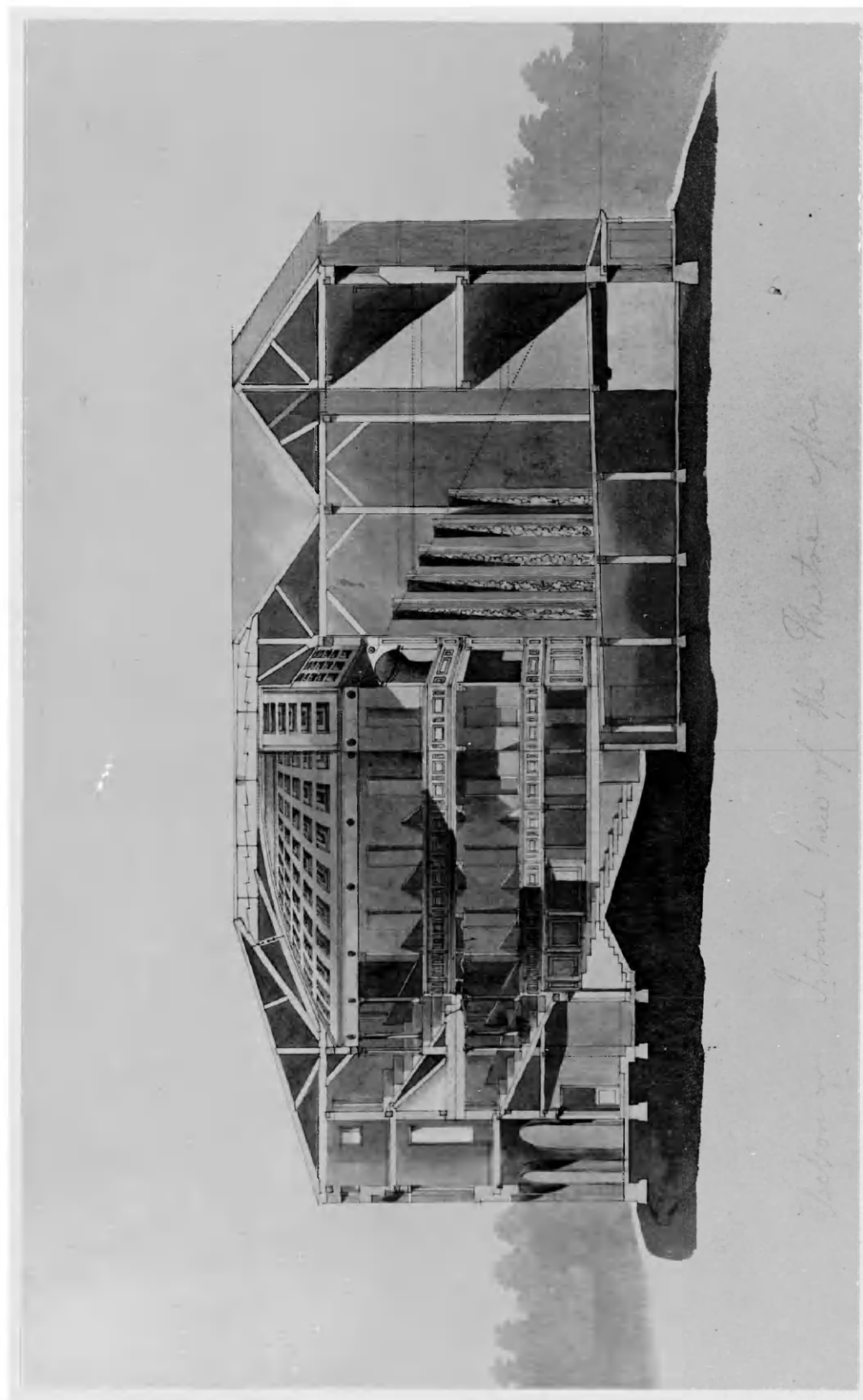


PLATE 13

CROSS SECTION OF THE THEATRE
 "DESIGNED AND PROPOSED TO BE BUILT," BY BENJAMIN HENRY LATROBE

was drawing to a close and the company was in the midst of the end-of-the-season benefits. News of Mrs. Green's benefit was conveyed to Philadelphia in a letter which sought in a plethora of malice to counteract the letters of recommendation through which Latrobe hoped to secure a chance to design the arsenal at Harper's Ferry. This "news" was transmitted to the public by William Cobbett, alias Peter Porcupine, in the following paragraph:

At Sans-culotte Richmond, the metropolis of Negro-land, alias the Ancient Dominion, alias Virginia, there was some time ago, a farce acted for the benefit of a girl by the name of Williams, whose awkward gait and gawky voice formerly contributed to the ridicule of the people of Philadelphia.

The farce was call'd the Apology; it was intended to satirize me and Mr. Alexander Hamilton (I am always put in good company.), and some other friends of the federal Government. The thing is said to be the most detestably dull that ever was mouthed by strollers. The Author is one La Trobe, the son of an old seditious dissenter; and I am informed that he is now employed in the erecting of a Penitentiary House, of which he is very likely to be the first tenant. In short, the farce was acted, and the very next night the playhouse was burnt down.⁶²

The facts in the case seem to have suffered a sea-change in transmission, and Latrobe takes issue with some of them:

While I was in Philadelphia, William Cobbett, alias Peter Porcupine, did me the honor of the following notice. The Paragraph furnished me with a hearty laugh, and I am not a little pleased with the posthumous honour done to my father's memory, who has been dead about eleven years. Miss Williams is Mrs. Green, for whose benefit the apology was acted. She is a very good dancer, and sings very well, though in the style of the English Stage, which does not please here [Philadelphia]. She is a very respectable woman, and a mother. I am sorry to have the occasion of the abuse thrown upon her, although the abuse of Porcupine is, in general, a certain proof of merit.⁶³

⁶² Latrobe, Latrobe's Journal, 84-85.

⁶³ Ibid.

Some of the vitriol in this attack would seem to have arisen out of conflicting political issues. The poisonous propaganda which was to be spattered so freely in the coming election, seems already to be brewing. Of Peter Porcupine's venomous facts, the only one which can actually be verified was, unfortunately, the fact of the theatre's burning.

The fire which destroyed the Richmond theatre occurred on the night of January 23, 1798.⁶⁴ Luckily there was no one in the theatre, but the building and most of the scenery, furniture, and stage apparatus, amounting to about three thousand pounds⁶⁵ in valuation was lost. The costumes, which had been removed to Mr. West's home to preserve them from vandals, were saved from the fire; and "part of the new scenery designed for the Norfolk Theatre was, by a dangerous exertion of some of the performers, rescued from the flames."⁶⁶

This fire proved a severe blow to Thomas Wade West. He was an elderly man with a large family and a staggering number of responsibilities. The theatre which he had been building in Alexandria was still unfinished -- still in the stage in which it was necessary to pour money into it without hope of any immediate return. West's

⁶⁴ A note on the frontispiece of Latrobe's folio of Designs of a Building proposed to be erected at Richmond gives the date on which the old theatre burned.

⁶⁵ The Norfolk Herald, & Public Advertiser, February 1, 1798.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

answer to this crushing blow, was immediate, and showed the courage, energy, and boldness which is more often found in young men to whom adversity has not taught caution. His decision was to keep all of his company busy all of the time, keep what was left of his costumes, scenery, and properties in constant use, and launch the new Alexandria theatre with the same energy and boldness with which he had initiated the Petersburg theatre during the past year. It was imperative that he begin to realize some return on the money he had expended in Alexandria and the interest he had been so carefully fostering there, but unfortunately the playhouse there was still unfinished. The theatre opened, however, on the twenty-fifth of January -- at Fulmore's Long Room.⁶⁷ Although several members of the company⁶⁸ were in Charleston, where they had gone to join Mr. Sollee for the reopening of his theatre on January first,⁶⁹ enough of the actors went to Alexandria to make a creditable showing, at least in so small a setting as Fulmore's Long Room.⁷⁰ The Alexandria season was long and full, and surprisingly well advertised in the newspapers. The season lasted from the twenty-fifth

⁶⁷ The Times and Alexandria Advertiser, January 25, 1798.

⁶⁸ See Appendix IV for the names of members of the company mentioned in the newspaper advertisements.

⁶⁹ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 377.

⁷⁰ The company appears to be comparable to that which played in Fredericksburg the preceding year under the direction of Mr. Hamilton. Since his name appears in the Alexandria casts, he may have been in charge of this group also.

of January through the twelfth of June⁷¹ with only a short hiatus during which the comedians played in Dumfries, "during the sitting of the court."⁷² The popular pantomimes which depended upon scenery and complicated mechanisms for their effectiveness were, with the exception of a production of Robinson Crusoe in May,⁷³ absent from the bills. Replacing them were the old favorites: Shakespeare's plays, Restoration comedies, and the English farces and comic operas which had lately been pushed into the background by the new scenic extravaganzas.

Although the trend was thus definitely away from novelty, extravagance, and variety of setting, the season did not pass completely without the introduction of new scenery. Mr. Green, whose ability in both design and rendering was favorably commented upon in the newspapers,⁷⁴ designed new scenery for the comic opera Inkle and Yarico. This "new scenery" consisted of two backdrops, a view of Yarico's cave, and a view of the town and harbor of Barbados.⁷⁵ The one pantomime of the season, Robinson Crusoe, was given on May first with all new scenery and machinery. Since the fire had deprived the company of so many of its settings for the proven favorites, there is little doubt

⁷¹ The Times and Alexandria Advertiser, June 12, 1798.

⁷² Ibid., May 14, 1798.

⁷³ Ibid., May 1, 1798.

⁷⁴ Norfolk Herald, April 21, 1801.

⁷⁵ The Times and Alexandria Advertiser, March 5, 1798.

that this was, literally, new scenery, rather than the more usual rebrushed canvas. So much new canvas would have been expensive, but Mr. West doubtless considered the expenditure worth while since it made possible the inclusion of the most popular of the pantomimes on the bills again and one calculated to draw an audience from the new, but fast growing, capitol in Washington.⁷⁶

The Norfolk season of 1798 began on March nineteenth while the Alexandria theatre was still in full swing. Mrs. West seems to have been in charge of this part of the company playing in Norfolk,⁷⁷ which was in general more competent and, with Mrs. J. West, far superior to the Alexandria contingent. The season's repertoire was less limited by the theatre fire in Richmond than the Alexandria's seems to have been. No doubt the Norfolk theatre contained some scenery and properties which had not been moved to Richmond and some old drops which could be rebrushed and renovated; for the repertoire included three pantomimes, two of which, Don Juan⁷⁸ and The Death of Captain Cook,⁷⁹ had been done many times before and were not, at that

⁷⁶ Powell, in her book, History of Old Alexandria, 142-43, tells of the Washington people who came to Alexandria to the theatre, spending the night in Jadsby's Tavern across the street. It seems obvious that West planned his Alexandria theatre with a Washington, as well as the local, audience in mind.

⁷⁷ See Appendix IV for the names of the actors who were mentioned in the newspaper advertisements.

⁷⁸ The Norfolk Herald, June 21, 1798.

⁷⁹ Ibid., June 14, 1798.

time, heralded with long advertisements as they had been previously. The Magician; or, Harlequin's Frolic⁸⁰ was advertised as being "new" but the scenery and machinery it required may have been stock pieces done over. For the most part, however, the selections of plays for the Norfolk season was much the same as that made for Alexandria, stressing the English farces and operas. One new play was offered: the comic opera Abroad and at Home, whose production was advertised as the first in America.⁸¹

There was a six week's interlude in the Norfolk season during which the company traveled to Petersburg and opened the theatre there during the races.⁸² Reopening in Norfolk in May, the season continued through the tenth of July.⁸³ The last performance of the season, which Mrs. West usually reserved for herself, was devoted to a benefit performance for Mrs. J. West. The program opened with the tragedy, Bunker Hill; or, Death of General Warren by John Daly Burk.⁸⁴ Burk was an Irish refugee who had failed, in quick order, as an editor in both Boston and New York, but had already proved himself a playwright. His

⁸⁰ The Norfolk Herald, June 9, 1798.

⁸¹ Ibid., March 23, 1798.

⁸² The only known copies of the three issues of the Virginia Gazette and Petersburg Intelligencer in which this theatrical season may have been recorded, are in the library at Harvard University.

⁸³ The Norfolk Herald, June 10, 1798.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Bunker Hill, performed at the Haymarket Theatre in Boston on February 17, 1797, netted him two thousand dollars.⁸⁵ The following September, it had been performed at the John Street Theatre in New York. Although this was the first play of Burk's to be produced by the Virginia Company, it was not to be the last. Burk settled in Petersburg, where he made his home until he was killed in a duel in 1808,⁸⁶ and at least one of his later plays was first produced by the Virginia Company in Petersburg.⁸⁷ Mrs. J. West continued her benefit program with an opera which had long been a favorite with her, The Highland Reel. The program was concluded with "The Fly" in which Mr. J. West, starting from the back of the stage, seemingly flew to the "farther part of the upper boxes" and returned "head foremost to the same place through a transparent sun."⁸⁸

"The Fly" seems to have been a success; for Mr. J. West repeated it for his own benefit and, two weeks later in Fredericksburg,⁸⁹ for his wife's, modifying it to suit the theatre there and giving it the more elaborate title, "The Fly; or, Neck or Nothing."⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Walter Pritchard Eaton, "John Daly Burk," Dictionary of American Biography, III, 279-80.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 289.

⁸⁷ The Petersburg Intelligencer, December 3, 1802.

⁸⁸ The Norfolk Herald, June 10, 1798. ✓

⁸⁹ The Virginia Herald, September 28, 1798.

⁹⁰ Ibid., September 4, 1798.

The company which played in Fredericksburg during the summer of 1798⁹¹ was made up primarily of the group which had played in Norfolk and Petersburg, the only additions being the Greens and the Decker family⁹² from the Alexandria players. The choice of plays for that season showed less restriction than either of the two preceding ones. Two entirely new numbers were added to the repertoire. On September fourteenth, for the benefit of Charles Lace Radcliffe, The Tempest was presented with Ariel, as usual, descending in a cloud, and a new farce "Written by an American -- The Man of the Times; or, A Scarcity of Cash."⁹³

On the nineteenth of September the new play Columbus was presented, followed by a new pantomime "Composed by Mr. T. West and Mr. Sully, called The Weird Sisters; or, The Birth of Harlequin."⁹⁴ The Mr. Sully was probably Matthew Junior; and the two young "Composers" were therefore cousins. It appears to have been highly successful; for Mrs. West chose it for her benefit which came, as usual, on the last night of the season. In this last production, the pantomime followed the tragedy of Richard III.⁹⁵

⁹¹ See Appendix IV for names of actors appearing in advertisements.

⁹² Mr. and Mrs. Decker (orchestra leader and actress with the company since 1791) now had a daughter on the stage. Doubtless still a child, she made her first appearance on the Richmond stage as Tom Thumb in 1804. The Virginia Argus, March 24, 1804.

⁹³ The Virginia Herald, September 14, 1798.

⁹⁴ Ibid., September 18, 1798.

⁹⁵ Ibid., October 15, 1798.

The company moved next to Richmond. After the fire there was literally nothing left of their playhouse; so they opened their season in a "Temporary Theatre"⁹⁶ in the Market Hall. There was an interesting addition to the company at this time from the Charleston theatre, Mr. and Mrs. Tubbs and Mrs. Tubbs daughter, Miss Elisabeth Arnold.⁹⁷ Miss Arnold, who did a comic dance with her step-father,⁹⁸ was only eleven years old. She would next appear on the Virginia stage when she was fifteen -- as Mrs. Hopkins, the wife of an Irish comedian. When he died, three years later, she would marry David Poe and begin the tragic descent of heartbreak, poverty and disease⁹⁹ which led to her early death in Richmond in 1811;¹⁰⁰ but no one who came to the Market Hall could have guessed, as they watched the petite child executing a comic dance, that they were seeing the girl who was to be the mother of one of America's greatest poets -- Edgar Allen Poe.

In the year which had passed since the burning of the Richmond theatre, Thomas Wade West had made an inspiring recovery; but time was

⁹⁶ The Examiner (Richmond), December 20, 1798.

⁹⁷ Willis, The Charleston Stage, 401-12.

⁹⁸ The Examiner (Richmond), December 20, 1798.

⁹⁹ Her life with David Poe was complicated by the fact that she was the better actor, received better parts, more ovations, and probably more pay. Her life was also made progressively more difficult by the arrival of three children and development of tuberculosis.

¹⁰⁰ Elisabeth Arnold Poe, "of the Virginia Theatre" died December 8, 1811, in Richmond. Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger, December 16, 1811.



PLATE 14

ELIZABETH ARNOLD POE, FROM AN ENGRAVING
AFTER AN ORIGINAL MINIATURE

at last catching up with the man who had begun life's work in a new country at an age when other men would have been relaxing into middle and old age. He had compressed a life's work into seven years with an urgency of one who knew how little time was left. Now that time was up. Thomas Wade West died on the twenty-eighth of July in 1799.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ "Memoranda from the Fredericksburg, Virginia, Gazette, 1787-1805," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, XIII (July, 1905-April, 1906), 425.

CHAPTER IX

Margaret Sully West as Manager of

The Virginia Company

Death of Mrs. J. West (Formerly Mrs. Bignall), 1806

Death of Margaret West, 1810

CHAPTER IX

All the ingredients of good theatre, an audience, actors, and playhouses still remained in Virginia, but the catalyst who had brought them all together so successfully for the past seven years was gone. Thomas Wade West was dead. He had, however, left Virginia a legacy, through which its theatre was to be sustained for the next twelve years. The plan which he had evolved, to solve the problem of the widely scattered audience in Virginia, necessitated the delegating of authority to others. His enterprises had, at a very early date, grown beyond the span to which one man could attend. He undoubtedly turned first to his wife, Margaret Sully West, who was not without managerial talents herself; but several other members of his company also gained training and experience in managing, without risking, as was usually the case, their life's savings in the process. Thus Mr. Hamilton, Mr. Edgar, and Mr. Klacide and probably several others of the Virginia Company gained experience and, with Mrs. West, carried their master's legacy to the future.

Margaret Sully West, in the years which followed her husband's death, proved herself a truly remarkable woman. His death, following so close upon the burning of the theatre must have hurtled her personal finances as well as those of the Virginia Company into a state of confusion. It would have been understandable, then, had this woman, who was already beyond the prime of life, chosen to settle down to grieve over her losses in the comparative quiet of bankruptcy.

Habit, and the troupers unquestionable belief that "the show must go on," would not permit her to take the easier way; and the Virginia Company continued to perform the same plays in the same places.

Carrying on was not, however, as simple as it may at first have seemed. Almost at once, new groups made a bid for the patronage of the Virginia audiences. Charles Lacey Radcliffe and Daniel McKensie, both members of West's company, launched out for themselves in Richmond and Fredericksburg.¹ Shortly after, Mr. Hamilton, who had been so successful in Fredericksburg in handling a subordinate group under West, gathered together a small company² and played a season in Norfolk. The Norfolk group were indeed a challenge to Mrs. West, who had long considered that town her home. She had been known as the proprietor of the theatre there ever since it had been built in 1796; and she was listed in the City Directory of 1801 as a resident of Norfolk, living at 64 Main Street.³

Mrs. West accepted these challenges to her leadership and soon proved herself as politically adroit in handling them as her husband had been. The "Theatre at the Ball Room of the Borough Tavern"

¹ The Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser, April 6, 1799; The Virginia Herald (Fredericksburg), April 30, 1799.

² Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton, Mr. and Mrs. Bardinge (from the Philadelphia Theatre) and their daughter, Miss Bardinge ("child of promise"), Mr. and Mrs. Douglass (who had been playing in North Carolina), Mr. Persons, Mr. M. Hamilton, Miss Miller, and Master Gray.

³ The Norfolk Directory for the Year 1801.

opened on the twenty-first of January.⁴ On February fourth, a notice appeared in the Herald, promising that the Norfolk Theatre would open in a few days.⁵ It was not until March tenth that the theatre actually opened,⁶ but in the meantime, Mrs. West had been successful in assuring the Norfolk audience that the group playing at the Borough Tavern were but one of the minor groups of entertainers and not "the theatre." By the end of the year, she had proved her superior leadership and reaffirmed the supremacy of the Virginia Company. Mr. McKenzie had returned to the fold,⁷ Mr. Hamilton had joined the company playing in Charleston,⁸ and Mr. Radcliffe's name was no longer connected in newspaper advertisements with any kind of theatrical endeavor.

With her authority established beyond question and the reins of the company held firmly in her own hands, Mrs. West next turned to the problem of maintaining the theatrical circuit which she had helped to build up over the years. She abandoned the new Alexandria theatre almost immediately,⁹ and she no longer considered Charleston within her sphere of influence. On the other hand, she kept the

⁴ The Norfolk Herald, January 21, 1800

⁵ Ibid., February 4, 1800.

⁶ Ibid., March 8, 1800.

⁷ Ibid., March 8, 1800 through July 29, 1800.

⁸ Hoole, The Ante-Bellum Charleston Theatre, 66-67.

⁹ The Examiner (Richmond), February 19, 1803.

Virginia Company playing the year around in Petersburg, Norfolk, Fredericksburg, and Richmond. The lack of a theatre in Richmond posed an immediate problem. If Mr. West had entertained hopes of building a theatre there from Latrobe's designs, his wife was forced to abandon them as too ambitious. In the fall of 1799, less than three months after his death, she took the Virginia Company to Richmond, making arrangements for them to play in the Eagle Tavern. This "temporary theatre" was undoubtedly an unsatisfactory expedient, but it was not until early in 1803 that plans for a new playhouse were definitely under way. In February of 1803, the following notice appeared in the Examiner:

To Master Builders,

A New Theatre is designed to be built on the lot of ground where formerly stood the Old Theatre, now the property of Mrs. West.

The funds necessary for the completion thereof, are raised, partly by subscription and partly from the funds of the proprietor. Those disposed to undertake the Building or a part thereof, are requested to send in their proposals immediately, to Mr. Meriwether Jones [Editor of Examiner] who will show the plan, and from whom more particular information may be acquired.

N.B. The Subscription for the above building is still open.¹⁰

The theatre, however, was still far from finished the March of 1804 when the following notice appeared in the Virginia Argus:

New Theatre

Notice to Subscribers --

The Committee appointed to superintend the building of the New Theatre, have directed that each subscriber pay, by the first day of April next, the sum of fifty dollars on each share, to their treasurer.

Geo. Fisher, Treasurer.¹¹

¹⁰ The Examiner (Richmond), February 19, 1803.

¹¹ The Virginia Argus (Richmond), March 24, 1804.

That the theatre rose much more slowly¹² than had any which Thomas Wade West erected during his life time, is obvious. The remarkable thing, however, is not the slowness with which it was built, but that it was built at all; for in order to gain money for the project, business men had to be convinced that it was going to pay dividends. It was not to be expected that a woman could so inspire the confidence of these men, but she did win their confidence, and she did build her theatre.

All this was not accomplished without criticism, criticism which was no doubt the more envenomed because the offending manager was a woman.

Communication.

Some people through a sordid love of money will descend to the commission of acts not only improper, but scandalous in the extreme. Mrs. West may be handed to the world as a character of this description. About eight or ten days ago, she allowed the actors and actresses under her direction to commence the taking of what are called their benefits. She has since heard that a match race will be run at New Market on Friday next, and intends (it is said) to pocket the profits of the playhouse for two or three evenings. Such conduct on the part of Mrs. West would be very hurtful to her reputation. She should not by any means or for any purpose break in upon the benefits. She should shew her liberality, by suffering that performer who may be so fortunate as to get Friday or Saturday evening for his benefit, to enjoy a benefit in reality.

Before these remarks are closed, it may not be amiss to notice the injustice of which Mrs. West is guilty, in demanding 50 l. from each player who takes a benefit, when the expenses of the house could be defrayed for a much smaller sum. She should take not a pittance more from them than is absolutely necessary for her own safety. Everything over that, is unwarranted extortion.

Mrs. West would not injure her respectability, either by hanging a lamp at the playhouse door, by attending more strictly to the

¹² The theatre was not occupied until 1806. The Enquirer, January 30, 1806.

management of the scenery, or by keeping intoxicated performers from the stage.¹³

Although much of this criticism had a personal ring and should be partially discounted for that reason, Mrs. West undoubtedly deserved the criticism she brought upon herself in the early years of her management for the neglect of technical details such as lighting and scenery. The neglect of the latter brought about the rebuke:

It is recommended to the manager to have a regular examination of the machinery below the stage; for on Tuesday evening, owing to the ponderosity of Mrs. Rowson, the springs of a trap door gave way, and not only the leading lady disappeared, but she carried little Mrs. Stuart down also. A sailor in the pit observed, that it put him in mind of the Royal George, which, when she went down, sucked a sloop of war into the vortex with her, that was at anchor at a little distance.¹⁴

Although Mrs. West seems to have endeavored to improve the scenery, the small technical details of production continued to be a source of worry and irritation to her. Adroit political maneuvers, expert handling of finances, and good direction of the plays at rehearsals, came naturally to her; but she found, through the repeated criticisms in the newspapers, that she had also to consider the personnel of the orchestra and the selections which they played. One critic complained in the newspapers that the band was too trifling and added that catgut was certainly not scarce in Norfolk;¹⁵ and another objected to hearing, between the acts of a tragedy, "Yankee Doodle" and other such untimely

¹³ The Petersburg Intelligencer, November 23, 1802.

¹⁴ Norfolk Herald, April 16, 1801.

¹⁵ The Norfolk Herald, July 8, 1800.

airs as "A Plague on these Wenches, they made such a Pother."¹⁶ While Mrs. West continued to play the leading roles in tragedy, she found that it was also imperative that she take cognizance at the same time of what was going on backstage among the carpenters and scene-shifters.

If the sound of the hammer, in the change of scenery, could either be avoided or lowered, it would be a great improvement; and although voices cannot be particularly ascertained, yet more discretion ought to be observed between the acts, behind the scenes. It is very grating, even at the most extreme part of the house, to hear vociferated, "d--m your eyes," and "You blood of a b----," private quarrels and jarrings ought not to offend the public ear; to those who sat in the stage box, it must have been distressing.¹⁷

If Mrs. West was thus severely criticized, especially in the first years after she took over the complete management of the Virginia Company, she was, on the other hand, respected and admired.¹⁸ This respect is reflected in the criticisms in the newspapers, but more particularly in her ability to gather and maintain a superior acting company. In addition to the members of her family, the Sullys and the Wests, who, it might have been charged, remained with her through family loyalty, there continued to reappear in her casts year after year, such familiar names as Decker, Hopkins, McKenzie, and Placide. The Greens, who had joined the Virginia Company in 1796, remained with it without a break until Mrs. West's death in 1810, after which Mr. Green himself took over the Richmond Theatre.

¹⁶ Norfolk Herald, June 8, 1802.

¹⁷ Ibid., April 21, 1801.

¹⁸ Ibid., January 29, 1801.

The most valuable member of the company remained, however, Mrs. J. West. Under the various names of Mrs. Dignall, Mrs. J. West, and Mrs. West, Jr., she played in the South for fourteen years; and the praises she won in the last of those years were as glowing and as warm as those she had called forth in the earlier years of her career. In the newspapers, no matter how caustic were the criticisms of the other members of the cast, a warm note of appreciation crept into any mention of Mrs. J. West. As Cora, in Pizarro, she was said to have been the admiration of the audience, playing with so much judgement, simplicity, and unaffected ease.¹⁹ As Emily Worthington, she was "admirable and far surpassed Mrs. Hodgkinson of the New York theatre."²⁰ The purity of her acting in the Castle Spectre was noted with the added comment that "Mrs. West, Jr., as Angela, would insure applause from the critics of Drury Lane or Convent Garden."²¹ Mrs. West was indeed fortunate that she could call on her daughter-in-law play after play; for, the reviewers noted, Mrs. J. West always drew a good audience.²²

Mrs. West, Sr.,²³ had under her control a well disciplined and well directed group of good actors; but her daughter-in-law was the only one among them who showed real genius on the stage, who could

¹⁹ Norfolk Herald, March 20, 1802.

²⁰ Ibid., February 20, 1802.

²¹ Ibid., March 19, 1803.

²² Ibid., June 3, 1800.

²³ The differentiation of Jr. and Sr. became frequently used.

project into the auditorium a warmth that made the audience love her. Thus when, on the twentieth of January, 1805, Mrs. J. West died, the manager of the Virginia Company lost her most valuable actress, her daughter-in-law, and the friend who had shared with her fourteen years of struggle toward better theatre in a new country. The newspaper published the notice: "Died -- On Sunday morning, Mrs. West, Jr., the most distinguished ornament of the Virginia stage."²⁴ The theatre did not waver in its program -- the play went on.

The Virginia Company was no longer a family affair. After his wife's death, James West's name disappeared from the bills.²⁵ The names of T. West, Mrs. T. West, W. West, and I. West also disappeared.²⁶ Of the Sullys, Matthew, Jr., alone remained on the stage. Matthew Sully, Sr., his wife being dead, retired to write "The Memoirs of his Life, abounding with real facts, acted in England, France, Ireland, and lastly in Virginia and Charleston (S.C.)."²⁷ After playing for a season in Norfolk,²⁸ Thomas Sully left the stage to devote himself

²⁴ The Enquirer (Richmond), January 22, 1805.

²⁵ Remembering his circus-like feats, we can not help wondering if he could have gone to England at this time and returned in 1818 with the large and successful circus which played throughout the country. The manager of the circus was named James West and, like Thomas Wade West's son, had a less successful brother in the theatre, named William.

²⁶ These members of the family never played important parts; and doubtless, like Thomas and Chester Sully, left for other occupations.

²⁷ Norfolk Herald, April 2, 1801.

²⁸ Ibid., February 4, 1800 through July 29, 1800.

exclusively to the art which was to make him famous. Lawrence Sully died in 1803; and Chester, after several seasons with the Virginia Company, established a lumber yard in Fredericksburg²⁹ and later a shipping business in Norfolk, where he became the secretary of the Norfolk Benevolent Mechanic Society.³⁰ The Sully girls, except for Charlotte who continued on the stage with her husband Mr. Chambers, all retired and married in Charleston where they settled.

The ranks of the Virginia Company, thus depleted, were filled by other children of theatrical families, the Clarks and the Placides. These children, like the Sullys and Wests before them, played minor parts and children's roles and occasionally entertained between the play and the farce. In this way, they learned the craft that was to keep their names before the public for the next forty years. Caroline and Edward Clark, Jane, Eliza, Caroline, Thomas, and Henry Placide, Mrs. Asterry, Mrs. Mann, Mrs. Waring, and Mrs. Blake³¹ - - Those theatre names which were to be prominent for half a century belonged to the children playing in the Virginia Company in 1809. Thus new life surged into the company, keeping it strong.

²⁹ The Daily Compiler (Richmond), August 1, 1814 contains the story of the flood in the river which destroyed Chester Sully's lumber yard in Fredericksburg.

³⁰ The Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald, December 11, 1816.

³¹ John A. Placide, second son of Alexander Placide, who died on September 16, 1812, was the only one of the Placide children whose name was not prominent for many years in American playbills.

The ageing manager, after several years struggle and several minor lapses, brought the scenery, the music, and all the minor technical details she had at first ignored, firmly under her control. As long as Mrs. West lived, she continued to bring to Virginia, in accordance with the long established principal of West and Pignall, the latest and newest thing in theatre. She brought new plays, the latest works of the popular English playwrights and such American plays as Liberty in Louisiana, "Written by a citizen of Charleston in celebration of our late Acquisition,"³² and The Indian Princess; or, the First Settlement of Virginia, "written by Mr. Parker of Philadelphia."³³ Mrs. West even introduced a new type of play in

A Melo DRAME

The Melo Drame being new to the English and American stages, it may be necessary to observe that in this species of Dramatick composition, Instrumental Musick is occasionally introduced during the pauses of the dialogue, with a view of heightening the effect, and aiding the expression of those passions which occupy the scene. The present admirable Piece [A Tale of Mystery] may be considered as the first experiment to introduce a new species of Drama. On the English Stage it has succeeded beyond calculation, and is presented to the public of Norfolk, under the strongest impression, that it will contribute in an eminent degree to their rational pleasures.³⁴

She also introduced the star system in Virginia, bringing to her play-houses Thomas Abthorpe Cooper, Master Barrett, "the Infant American Roscius,"³⁵ who was to be the "Gentleman George of later years, and

³² Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger, May 17, 1806.

³³ Ibid., May 1, 1809.

³⁴ Ibid., March 22, 1805.

³⁵ The Virginia Argus, February 24, 1807.

Master Payne, who was to be remembered as the author of Home Sweet Home.³⁶

As Mrs. West grew older she ceased to act on the stage herself; and she probably delegated more and more authority to Alexander Placide and J. William Green. Thus when Margaret West died in Norfolk on the morning of June 6, 1810,³⁷ and was buried the following day in the Protestant Episcopal Churchyard,³⁸ the Norfolk Theatre continued its season, and no mention was made of her passing. A program was given on the day following her funeral in which Charles Young, who ten years later, was to be manager of the Norfolk Theatre, made his first appearance, thus giving to the story of her life a Fortinbras ending reminiscent of Hamlet. It would have pleased her to have it so.

Although no particular mention was made of it at her death, Margaret West had to her credit a surprising accomplishment. She had taken over a theatre at a time when it was staggering under the double blow of the burning of the Richmond playhouse and the death of a strong manager, and she had not only maintained that theatre for eleven years but had renewed and strengthened it. Mrs. Ryan had tried to carry on after the death of her husband and had failed. Mrs. Placide was to attempt the same thing after her husband's death in 1812, and

36 "Home Sweet Home" was a song in his opera Clari (1823).

37 Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger, June 6, 1810.

38 Tucker, Abstracts, 218.

she, too, was to fail. It was, indeed, a difficult task for a woman to undertake; Eighteenth and early nineteenth century men were doubtless none too pleased at the thought of being managed by a woman. To her credit, too, was the new Richmond Theatre which, though doubtless inferior to the one her husband would have built, was none-the-less an admirable accomplishment.

The death of Margaret West marks the end of a chapter in the history of theatre in Virginia; but in history, there are no beginnings and no endings. As the first company to bring theatre back to Virginia after the Revolution contained two actors who had played in the colony before the war, and as Lewis Hallam, Jr., returning in 1786, recalled his first appearance in Virginia in 1752; so was the end of this story pregnant with new beginnings; for where there is an audience, there will be theatre. Where there are people who believe in the theatre as a power for good or as a legitimate and needed relaxation and amusement, they will write their own plays and act in them³⁹ and they will draw professional actors to them, encourage good managers, and build playhouses.

At a time when the North was dominated by staid and strong

³⁹ Although the examples of amateur dramatic efforts in Virginia during this entire period are too many to mention, the most outstanding is worth special note. The Thespian Society of Norfolk, which seems to have been established in 1807, had by 1809, taken in \$3,893. Of this, \$2072.77 was spent for wardrobe, music, and the rent on the theatre [which belonged to Mrs. West] and \$1,776.46 was distributed to the poor through a "victualing house" which they maintained. Norfolk Gazette, and Public Advertiser, January 20, 1809.

middle-class men, raised in the Calvinist or Quaker religion, who disapproved of all entertainment, theatre flourished in the South, patronized by such men as George Washington, Benjamin Harrison, and John Marshall, in the English tradition of the gentlemen of the Restoration but strengthened, too, by the deep and ready laughter and wholehearted applause of the sailors who stopped at Norfolk, of the slaves and the free people of color who, with their love of music and color and dance, found so much satisfaction in the galleries of the Virginia theatres. Virginia's greatest contribution to the theatre was its hungry audience.

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APPENDIX I

ITINERARY OF DENNIS RYAN

DENNIS RYAN

This itinerary is compiled from available references listed in the Bibliography.

1783, February 11, Baltimore.

June 9, Baltimore.

June New York.

August 16, New York.

December 2, Baltimore.

1784, February 14, Baltimore

Spring, Annapolis for three weeks.

June 3, Receives permission from city of Richmond.

June 12, Richmond, performances of Douglas and Padlock.

June 22, 26, Richmond, performances of Cheats of Scapin.

July 10, Applied to city for permission to give benefit for City of Richmond.

July 12, City acknowledges but cannot accept.

November 29, Richmond, performances of Roman Father and Tony Lumpkin in Town.

December 11, Richmond, performances of Miser and A Trip to Scotland.

December 13, Richmond, Mayor ordered to notify Mr. Ryan that unless he rendered an account of the number of plays produced and pay the tax, permission to play will be suspended. In the future, settlement to be weekly.

1785, March, April, May

Charleston, S. C., Short season.

November 14, Richmond, notification from Mayor.

1785, November 16, Richmond, concert at Capitol. Mrs. Hyde.
1786, January Died in Baltimore.

APPENDIX II

ITINERARY OF ALEXANDER-MARIE QUESNAY

ALEXANDER-MARIE QUESNAY
Chevalier de Beaurepaire

This itinerary is compiled from available references listed in the Bibliography. Obvious discrepancies in dates are noted with an *

- 1756, November 23, Born in France.
- 1777, April Arrived in Yorktown, Virginia.
- 1778, Fall A Captain in the Revolutionary army until this date. Spent following two years in the home of John Peyton. Met John Page of "Rosewell" who suggested the Academy.
- 1780, Early in year, Left Peyton's home.
- 1782, January 2, Produced Eugene in Philadelphia. This was first production in French in America. Washington attended performance.
- January 5, Advertised a second production for January 11th of Eugene and Cheats of Scapin by "request"
- January 8, Informs the public that performance on 11th is cancelled; that no exhibition will be given contrary to the law.
- February 27, Sarah Bache's letter to her father concerning the Academy.
- Later Advertises a promise to alter theatre to a ballroom in Academy.
- 1782-85, During this period we know only, that he traveled to New York at some point and organized a school.
- 1785, Fall, Organized a school in Richmond.
- 1786, January 14, Public announcement: Quesnay desires that the Academy be "useful to the community and consequently honorable to myself." Will stay "only one year more."
- *March Traveled to France (Dictionary of Amer. Biography)

- 1786, May 8, Advertisement in Richmond paper signed by Quesnay.
- June 28, Article in newspaper concerning laying of
 cornerstone for Academy. Quesnay present.
- July 8, Laying of cornerstone (Hugh Blair Grigsby).
- August 30, Advertisement concerning opening of school on
 September 4th.
- August 26, Hallam and Henry sign articles with Quesnay for
 the use of the theatre in the Academy.
- October 16-November 16,
 Hallam and Henry occupy Academy.
- November 29, Advertisement concerning Academy by Quesnay.
- December 28, James Madison's letter to Jefferson carried by
 Quesnay to France.

APPENDIX III

**METHODS OF RESEARCH
EXPLANATION AND CHART**

EXPLANATION

In order to better understand the theatre in Virginia, it seemed advisable to know as much as possible about the actors. What class of people were they? How successful were they artistically and financially? Did they affiliate themselves with one company and remain with it for the remainder of their careers or did they move about?

The great body of these actors seemed at first, to defy study. Casts listed them as Mr. Smith or Mrs. Jones. Theatre families further complicated the story by increasing the number of people bearing a single name; in twenty years, there were fourteen different Wests and twelve different Sullys listed in the casts of plays given in Virginia. Where two men of the same name were listed on the same bill, an initial was added to the name of the younger, newer, or less important player. Thus we have J. West, I. West, W. West, T. West, etc., etc. However, when an older member of a family died, the next in age and importance, dropped the identifying initial from his name. Thus Mr. J. West became Mr. West after the death of his father in 1799. This led to such confusing bits of information as the death notices of Mr. Bignall or Mr. Watts followed by continued listings of Mr. Bignall or Mr. Watts in subsequent casts.

In an effort to bring some order out of the confusion, a file and chart have been kept on each actor. The file contains all the cast listings for a given actor and any mention of him in newspaper

reviews or memoirs. The chart, similar to the one which follows, recorded every mention of a given name in the casts of Richmond, Norfolk, Alexandria, Fredericksburg, and Petersburg in Virginia, Charleston, Savannah, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and any other theatre for which information was available.

The result has been highly illuminating. In several cases, three charts were kept, unknowingly, for one person. From mention in memoirs, other theatre studies or from such clues in newspaper casts as Mrs. J. West (The late Mrs. Bignall) it became apparent that Mrs. Bignall, Mrs. J. West, and Mrs. West, Jr., were all one person. Study of marriage records gave clues to some such changes in names; for Miss West became Mrs. Bignall; Miss Thomas played as Mrs. Burke and later as Mrs. Jefferson; and Miss C. Placide was the same actress as Mrs. Waring and Mrs. Blake.

On the other hand, a chart was often found to contain the record of more than one actor. The following chart, for instance, contains notations recording every mention in the playbills of "Mr. West." The result is a record of four different men, two of whom have been confused and the others ignored in the theatre histories.

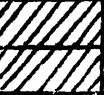


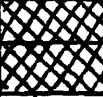






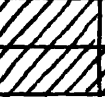






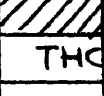
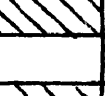
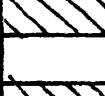
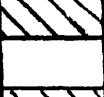





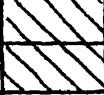


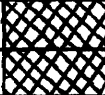

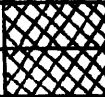






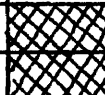
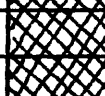
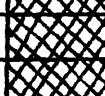
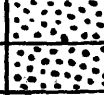
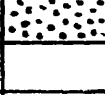
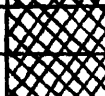
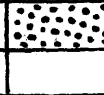
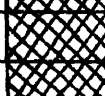
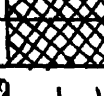
Thomas Wade West applied for permission to play in Richmond in 1790. He was described in 1796 as an elderly man with a large family. James West, with whom Eola Willis confuses him was one of the actors John Henry recruited from England for the Philadelphia Theatre in 1792. He was young and had the reputation of being a dandy. He

would seem to be the "Mr. West from the Philadelphia Theatre," "his first appearance on this stage" in Norfolk and Richmond in 1809 and 1811.

A second James West was the son of Thomas Wade West. His specialty was in singing comic songs and in leaping great distances and diving headforemost through a transparent sun. He married Mrs. Bignall. After her death in 1805, he left the South and played one season in the North and then disappeared. There seems to be a remote possibility that he and the fourth "Mr. West" on the chart are the one and same person; The James West who brought an elaborate circus with forty horses from England to tour the American seaboard.

More than three hundred charts, similar to the one which follows, have been compiled, and together they have proved an invaluable source of information for the better understanding of the post-revolutionary theatre in Virginia.

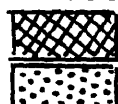
WEST

	RICH	NORF	PTBG	FRED	ALEX	CHST	PHIL	PROV	N.Y.	
1789	↓	PETITION FOR PERMISSION TO PLAY								
1790										
1791							↓	FIRST APPEARANCE		
1792								IN AMERICA.		
1793										
1794										
1795										
1796										
1797										
1798										
1799	THOMAS WADE WEST - DIED - JULY 28, 1799									
1800										
1801										
1802										
1803										
1804										
1805										
1806	FROM PHILADELPHIA THEA.									
1807	↓									
1808		↓	FIRST APPEARAN.							
1809			ON THIS STAGE.							
1810	↓									
1811										
1812										
1813										
1814										
1815										
1816										
1817										
1818										
1819										
1820										



THOMAS WADE WEST, MGR.

JAMES WEST, SON



J. WEST, PHILA. THEA. SC.

JAMES WEST, CIRCUS

APPENDIX IV

**MEMBERS OF THE ACTING COMPANIES
IN VIRGINIA TOWNS BETWEEN 1764-1789
AS LISTED IN THE CASTS PRINTED IN THE NEWSPAPERS**

1784

RICHMOND

Theatre:

Company:	Mr. Ryan, Dennis (manager)	Mrs. Ryan
	Mr. Godwin	Mrs. Hyde
	Mr. Wall, Thomas	Mrs. Smith
	Mr. Lewis	Mrs. Lewis
	Mr. Smith	Miss. Wall

Season: June 3-July 12, November 29-December 13

Plays: Douglas
The Padlock
The Roman Father
Tony Lumpkin in Town
Miser
A Trip to Scotland
The Cheats of Scapin

1785

RICHMOND

Theatre:

Company: Mr. Ryan, Dennis (manager) Mrs. Remington
Mrs. Hyde
Mrs. Ryan

Season: November

Plays:

1788

RICHMOND

Theatre: Hall of Quesnay's Academy on Shockoe Hill

Company:	Mr. Hallan, Lewis (co-manager)	
	Mr. Henry, John (co-manager)	
	Mr. Signell, Thomas	Mrs. Morris
	Mr. Harper	Mrs. Harper
	Mr. Morris	Mrs. Kenna
	Mr. Woolls	Miss. Luke
	Mr. Lake	Miss. Durang, Caroline
	Mr. Durang, John (dancer)	Miss. Storer, Maria
	Mr. Kenna	
	Mr. Kenna, J.	
	Mr. Biddle	

Season: October-November

Plays: School for Scandal
Alexander the Great
Poor Soldier
Love a la Mode

NORFOLK

Theatre:

Company: Mr. Heard (manager)

Season:

Plays:

1787

RICHMOND

Theatre: Hall of Quesnay's Academy

Company:	Mr. Kidd	Mrs. Giffard
	Mr. Lewis	Mrs. Smallwood
	Mr. Wells	Mrs. Parsons
	Mr. Lake	Mrs. Lewis
	Mr. Bisset	Mrs. Rankin'
	Mr. Parsons	Miss. Gordon
	Mr. Rankin	

Season: November-December

Plays: Beggar's Opera
 Love a la Mode
 — King Henry the Fourth
 Miss in her Teens
 The Recruiting Officer
 Lothe
 — Romeo and Juliet
 The Citizen
 — The Merchant of Venice
 Vintner Tricked

* Noted on playbills as "First appearance on this stage."

'Noted on playbills as "The late Mrs. Remington, being her first appearance on this stage in two years."

1788

FREDERICKSBURG

Theatre:

Company:

Season: May 6

Plays: Agreeable Surprise

FREDERICKSBURG

Theatre:

Company: Mr. Lewis

Mrs. Lewis

Season: June

Plays:

FREDERICKSBURG

Theatre:

Company: "another company"

Season: August-September-October

Plays:

FREDERICKSBURG

Theatre:

Company: Mr. Kenna

Mrs. Kenna

Season: October to mid-November

Plays:

1799

FREDERICKSBURG**Theatre:****Company:****Season: October 22****Plays: The Suspicious Husband**

1790

RICHMOND

Theatre: Academy Hall (New Theatre)

Company:	Mr. West (co-manager)	Mrs. West
	Mr. Signall (co-manager)	Mrs. Hyde
	Mr. Lewis	Mrs. Lewis
	Mr. Biddle	Mrs. Signall
	Mr. Richards	Mrs. Davids
	Mr. Tobine	Miss. Wade
	Mr. Walpole	
	Mr. Diddap	

Season: October

Plays: Know Your Own Mind
Farmer
Wonder
Venice Preserved
Poor Soldier

NORFOLK

Theatre:

Company:

Season: May

Plays: The School for Scandal

FREDERICKSBURG

Theatre: The Market House

Company: Mr. Godwin (co-manager)
Mr. M'Grath (co-manager)

Season: April

1791

RICHMOND

Theatre: Academy Hall

Company:	Mr. West (co-manager)	Mrs. Johnson
	Mr. Signall (co-manager)	Mrs. Decker
	Mr. Cleland	Mrs. Signall
	Mr. Kenna, J.	Mrs. Kenna
	Mr. Hallam	Mrs. West
	Mr. Signall, jr.	Mrs. Davids
	Mr. Courtney	
	Mr. Andrews	
	Mr. Rifferts	
	Mr. Reilly	
	Mr. Davids	
	Mr. Kenna	
	Mr. Sheldon	
	Mr. Gordon	

Season: December

Plays: Isabella
 He Would Be a Soldier
 The Rump

FREDERIC ASBURY

Theatre:

Company:

Season: August-September

Plays: The Rump
 Iniole and Varico
 Farmer
 Love in a Village
 Poor Soldier
 Dibdin's Quaker

1792

RICHMOND

Theatre:

Company: Mr. Bignall, John (co-manager)
 Mr. West, Thomas Wade (co-manager)
 Mr. Courtney Mrs. Sully, sen.
 Mr. Kenna, J. Mrs. West
 Mr. Sully * Mrs. Decker
 Mr. Sully, M. * Mrs. Kenna
 Mr. Hallam Mrs. Bignall
 Mr. Bignall Miss. Sully, Charlotte
 Mr. Andrews Miss. Sully, Elizabeth
 Mr. Rifferts Miss. Sully, Sarah
 Mr. Hamilton ** Master Sully
 Mr. Kenna

Season: August-December

Plays: Wild Oats
 The Pannel
 The Maid of the Mill
 Sorrows of Werter
 Shakespeare's Jubilee
 Such Things Are
 Ways and Means
 The Road to Ruin
 No Song, No Supper
 Know Your Own Mind

*Noted on playbills as "from the Royal Circus, Edinburgh, being their first appearance on this stage."

**Noted on playbills as "from the Theatre Royal, Dublin, being his first appearance on this stage."

1793

RICHMOND

Theatre:

Company: Mr. West, Thomas Wade (co-manager)
 Mr. Bignall, John (co-manager)
 Mr. Chambers Mrs. Chambers **
 Mr. Kenna, J. Mrs. Sully
 Mr. Hallam Mrs. Edgar
 Mr. Sully, Matthew, sen. Mrs. Gray
 Mr. Clifford Mrs. West
 Mr. Sully, Lawrence Mrs. Murray *
 Mr. Pifferts Mrs. Marriott
 Mr. Kedeey Mrs. Henderson *
 Mr. Bignall, Isaac Mrs. Kedeey
 Mr. Greenwood Miss. Sully, Elisabeth
 Mr. Murray * Master Sully, Chester
 Mr. Sully, Matthew Master Sully, Thomas
 Mr. Edgar
 Mr. Gray
 Mr. Henderson *
 Mr. Marriott
 Mr. Decker

Scenery:

Mr. Audin

Season: October-December

Plays:	Young Quaker	The Midnight Hour
	Plitch of Bacon	The Merchant of Venice
	A Day in Turkey	The School of Scandal
	Four Soldier	The Son-in-Law
	Provoked Husband	True Born Irishmen
	Columbus	Wild Oats
	The Haunted Tower	Rosina
	Love a la Mode	The Orphan
	The West Indian	High Life Below Stairs
	Midas	Jealous Wife
	Fannel	The Death of Captain Cook
	The Man of the World	

* Noted on playbills as "first appearance on this stage."

** Noted on playbills as "former Charlotte Sully."

1793 (continued)

NORFOLK

Theatre: Wooden warehouse on Calvert's Lane

Company: Mr. West, Thomas Wade (co-manager)
Mr. Bignall, John (co-manager)

Season:

Plays: Deserter

ALEXANDRIA

Theatre: Pullmore's Long Room

Company:	Mr. M'Grath (manager)	Mrs. McBrath
	Mr. Fitzgerald	Mrs. Fitzgerald

Season: November

Plays: Douglas
The Lying Valet
The Contrast
The King and Miller of Mansfield
The Roman Father
The Poor Soldier

1756

RICHMOND

Theatre: Academy Hall

Company:	Mr. West (co-manager)	Mrs. Signall (co-mgr.)
	Mr. Edgar	Mrs. West
	Mr. Nelson	Mrs. Val
	Mr. West, J.	
	Mr. Signall	
	Mr. Dubois	
	Mr. Val	
	Mr. Francesquay	
	Mr. Munto	
	Mr. Jones	
	Mr. Gray	
	Mr. Latte	
	Mr. Harriot	
	Mr. Bartlet	

Season: October-December

Plays: Venice Preserved
 Two Hunters and the Milkmaid
 Maid of the Mill
 American Independence
 Notoriety
 Son-in-Law
 Cymon and Sylvia
 The Bird Catcher

ALEXANDRIA

Theatre:

Company:	Mrs. Sully
	Mrs. Pick

Season: July 16

Plays:

1796 (continued)

WOLFPOLE

Theatre: Brick Theatre on East side of Fenchurch Street
between Main and Bermuda Streets

Company:	Mr. West (co-manager)	Mrs. Bignall (co-manager)
	Mr. West, J. *	Mrs. West
	Mr. Anna	Mrs. Grey
	Mr. Bignall	Mrs. Doctor
	Mr. Jones	Mrs. Bignall
	Mr. Rifferts	Mrs. Pick *
	Mr. Sully, Matthew, sen.	Mrs. Lundberry *
	Mr. Sully, Matthew, jun.	Mrs. West, J.
	Mr. Gray	Mrs. Sully, Matthew, sen.
	Mr. Freeman *	Mrs. Decker
	Mr. Doctor	Mrs. Marriott *
	Mr. West, T	Mrs. Pendergast
	Mr. Hamilton	Mrs. Munte
	Mr. Edgar	Miss. West
	Mr. Anna, J	Master Gray
	Mr. Munte	Mrs. Godwin
	Mr. Francesquay	

Season: May-August

Plays:	The West Indian	The Man of the World
	Don Juan	Rosina
	The Enchantress	The Devil to Pay
	The Spoiled Child	The Highland Reel
	The English Merchant	Modern Antiques
	The Rival Candidates	The Inconstant
	Bold Stroke for a Husband	Midnight Hour
	The Poor Soldier	The Contrast
	The Jew	The Tamer Tamed
	Country Lasses	How to Grow Rich
	The Recruiting Officer	The Rump
	The Padlock	Lionel & Clarissa
	The Conscious Lovers	Harlequin's Invitation
	The Frise	The Brothers
	Duplicity	Robinson Crusoe
	The Country Lasses	The Child of Nature

* Noted on playbills as "first appearance on this stage"

1795 (continued)

NORFOLK (continued)

Plays:	A Bold Stroke for a Wife	Clandestine Marriage
	Surrender of Calais	The Land of Liberty
	Peeping Tom	Douglas
	Gustavus Vasa	Alexander the Great
	Village Lawyer	The Sultan in Chains
	The Wheel of Fortune	The Haunted Tower
	No Song, No Supper	The Mogul Tale
	The Foundling	Barbarossa
	All the World's a Stage	La Forêt Noire

PETERSBURG

Theatre:

Company: Mr. Pick

Mrs. Pick
Mrs. Sully

Season: June 28

Plays:

1736

RICHMOND

Theatre:

Company:	Mr. West (manager)	Mr. Beeley
	Mr. Greer	Mr. Fitzgerald *
	Mr. Bartlett	Mr. Copeland
	Mr. Eector	
	Mr. Turnbull, Gavin	Mrs. West
	Mr. Morton	Mrs. Turnbull
	Mr. West, T.	Mrs. Shaw
	Mr. Green, J. W.	Mrs. Douviller **
	Mr. Butler	Mrs. Green
	Mr. Prignore	Miss. West, Harriet
		Master Shaw

Season: November 1736-January 1737

Plays:	School for Soldiers	The Son-in-Law
	Irishman in London	No Song, No Supper
	Wild Oats	George Barnwell
	Don Juan	Peeping Tom of Coventry
	Everyone Has His Fault	Love in a Village
	The Village Lawyer	Road to Ruin
	A Bold Stroke for a Wife	The Rump
	Oscar & Malvina	

SUFFOLK COURT HOUSE

Theatre:

Company:	Mr. Edgar	Mr. Bignall
	Mr. Watts	
	Mr. Sedey	Mrs. King
	Mr. Evans	Mrs. Edgar
	Mr. Purnell	Mrs. Lundberry

Season: October 12

Plays:	She Stoops to Conquer	All the World's a Stage
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*Noted on playbill as "first appearance on this stage."

**Noted on playbill as "the late Madame Placide."

1796 (continued)

NORFOLK

Theatre:

Company: Mr. West (manager) Mr. Edgar Mr. Hogg * Mr. Turnbull * Mr. Watts * Mr. Keeley * Mr. Bignall Mr. Bartlett * Mr. Kadey Mr. Copeland Mr. Frizmore Mr. West, T. Mr. M'Grath Mr. King * Mr. Letus Mons. Douvillier	Mr. Decker Mr. Shaw Mr. Robbins Mrs. West Mrs. Kadey Mrs. Gray Mrs. Edgar Mrs. Graupner Mrs. Hogg Mrs. Turnbull Mrs. King * Miss. West, Harriet Miss. Wall Madame Douvillier ** Master West
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Season: July 4-early October

Plays: The Beaux Stratagem No Song, No Supper West Indian All in Good Humour Venice Preserved Love a-la-Mode A New Way to Pay Old Debts Return of the Laborers Jealous Wife Don Juan School for Scandal Irishman in London Barbarossa The Recruit Wild Oats	The Farmer Easy Body Robinson Crusoe Mountaineers Thomas and Sally Speculation French Vauxhall Gardens The Pop's Fortune The Wedding Day — Romeo & Juliet The Highland Reel High Life Below Stairs — Othello Honest Yorkshireman Wonder
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* Noted on playbills as "first appearance on this stage."

** Noted on playbills as "the late Madame Placide, being her first appearance on this stage."

1796 (continued)

NORFOLK (continued)

Plays: (continued)

Adopted Child	Notoriety
Earl of Essex	The Quaker
The Sultan	Robbers
Beggar's Opera	The Deserter
The Shamrock	Provok'd Husband
Young Quaker	Three Weeks After Marriage
The Prize	Fair Penitent
Road to Ruin	The Generous Soldier
Doctor and Apothecary	Speculation
Douglas	The Lying Valet
The Midnight Hour	The Italian Shades
Child of Nature	The Wedding Ring

NORFOLK

Theatre:

Company: Mr. Watts
Mr. Signall

Season: December

Plays:	She Stoops to Conquer	The Virgin Unmask
	Miss in Her Teens	The Contrast
	Beaux Stratagem	The Mock Doctor

PETERSBURG

Theatre:

Company:

Season: October-November 4

Plays: Recruit
Purse
Highland Reel
Rosina

1797

RICHMOND

Theatre: Academy Hall

Company:	Mr. West (manager)	Mrs. West
	Mr. West, J.	Mrs. West, J.
	Mr. Green	Mrs. Shaw
	Mr. Bartlett	
	Mr. Robbins	

Season: November-January 23 *

Plays: As You Like It
 The Farmer

NORFOLK

Theatre:

Company:	Mr. Green	Mrs. West
	Mr. Turnbull	Mrs. West, J.
	Mr. Ashton	Mrs. Turnbull
	Mr. Morton	Mrs. Shaw
	Mr. Copeland	Mrs. Green
	Mr. Bartlett	Mrs. Decker
	Mr. Haeley	Mrs. Ashton
	Mr. Radcliffe	Miss. Chaucer
	Mr. Signall	Miss. West
	Mr. West, J.	
	Mr. West, T.	
	Mr. Helmhold	
	Mr. Hamilton	
	Mr. Decker	
	Mr. McGrath	
	Mr. Watts	

Season: June

Plays: Macbeth
 The Rump

* Academy Hall burned the evening of January 23, 1798

1797 (continued)

PETERSBURG**Theatre:****Company:****Season:** January 18-March 7, April 27-May 6, May 29-June***Plays:****FREDERICKSBURG****Theatre:**

Company:	Mr. Turnbull	Mrs. Green
	Mr. West	Mrs. West, J.
	Mr. West, T.	
	Mr. Bartlett	
	Mr. Radcliffe	
	Mr. Beeley	
	Mr. Ashton	
	Mr. Hamilton	
	Mr. Morton	
	Mr. Bignall	

Season: Mid-August to end of October**Plays:** Highland Reel

* Race week

1728

RICHMOND

Theatre: Temporary Theatre in Market Hall

Company:	Mr. West	Mrs. West
	Mr. Green	Mrs. West, J.
	Mr. West, T.	Mrs. Bignall
	Mr. West, J.	Mrs. Watts
	Mr. Taylor	Mrs. Green
	Mr. McKenzie	Miss. Arnold
	Mr. Bignall	
	Mr. Radcliffe	
	Mr. Watts	
	Mr. Tubbs	
	Mr. Sully	
	Mr. Sully, jun.	

Season: December

Plays: Wives as They Were
 Flitch of Bacon

FREDERICKSBURG

Theatre:

Company: Port of Virginia Company

Season: August

Plays: Cymon & Sylvia
 Poor Soldier

1798 (continued)

NORFOLK

Theatre: Norfolk Theatre

Company: Mr. Turnbull
 Mr. Price
 Mr. Taylor
 Mr. Watts
 Mr. Green
 Mr. West, T.
 Mr. Bignall
 Mr. Perkins
 Mr. Sully
 Mr. West, J.

Mrs. West
 Mrs. West, J.
 Miss Gillespie

Season: March 19-30 *, May 24-July 11

Plays: Fortune's Fool
 The Irish Widow
 School for Scandal
 The Rump
 Abroad and at Home
 The Prize
 Animal Magnetism
 Everyone has His Fault
 The Lock and Key
 The Mountaineers
 The Spoiled Child
 A Cure for Heartaches
 The Poor Soldier
 Douglas
 Cymon & Sylvia
 The Quaker
 Bunker Hill

The Way to Get Married
 The Magician
 Beaux Stratagem
 The Death of Captain Cook
 Adidre
 Love a-la-Mode
 The School for Wives
 The Virgin Unmasked
 The Dramatist
 Don Juan
 The Battle of Hexham
 The Gamester
 Thomas and Sally
 Wives as They Were
 Everybody
 Highland Reel

*Noted on playbills as "last week of performances until after the Petersburg Races."

1798 (continued)

ALEXANDRIA

Theatre: Fullmore's Long Room

Company:	Mr. Hamilton (co-manager)	Mrs. Decker
	Mr. Shaw (co-manager)	Mrs. Shaw
	Mr. Healey	Mrs. Hamilton
	Mr. Bartlett	Miss. Miller *
	Mr. Morton	Miss. Melford *
	Mr. Radcliffe	
	Mr. Santlet	Scenery:
	Mr. Decker	Mr. Green

Season: January-early May

Plays:	Child of Nature	The Quaker
	Lying Valet	Beaux Stratagem
	The Fair Penitent	The Foundling
	Ben Ton	The School for Scandal
	Ways and Means	The Poor Soldier
	The Best Indian	— The Merchant of Venice
	The Curse	Spoil'd Child
	Douglas	The Mountaineers
	Young Quaker	Everyone Has His Fault
	The Parsonage	The Jew
	Wedding Day	The Rage
	The Foundling	No Song, No Supper
	Rosina	Sicilian Romance
	The Midnight Hour	All the World's a Stage
	The Farmer	The Dramatist
	George Barnwell	A Word to the Wise
	Son-in-Law	— Macbeth
	Devil to Pay	Robinson Crusoe
	The Busybody	Irishman in London
	The Padlock	Venice Preserved
	Inkle & Yarico	Love-a-la-Mode
	Such Things Are	
	Romp	
	— Romeo and Juliet	
	The King and Miller	

*Noted in playbills as "first appearance on this stage."

1799

RICHMOND

Theatre: Eagle Tavern Assembly Room
 Company: Mr. Radcliffe, Charles Lace Mr. K'Kenzie, Daniel
 Season: April 5
 Plays: Venice Preserved Love-a-la-Mode

RICHMOND

Theatre: Eagle Tavern Assembly Room
 Company:
 Season: October 14-
 Plays:

ALEXANDRIA

Theatre: Fullmore's Long Room
 Company: Mr. Hamilton
 Season: February 19 *
 Plays: Mountaineers Furze

ALEXANDRIA

Theatre: "New Theatre just completed"
 Company:
 Season: June
 Plays: Mountaineers A Trip to Curro
 Prize

* Noted on playbills as "last night of company in town."